

**butterflies and black & blue birds [on hiatus]**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/34122838) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/34122838>.

Rating: [Teen And Up Audiences](#)  
Archive Warnings: [Graphic Depictions Of Violence](#), [Major Character Death](#)  
Category: [Gen](#)  
Fandoms: [Minecraft \(Video Game\)](#), [Dream SMP](#)  
Relationships: [Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit](#), [Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson](#), [Technoblade & TommyInnit](#), [No Romantic Relationship\(s\)](#)  
Characters: [Wilbur Soot](#), [TommyInnit \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Phil Watson \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Technoblade \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Clay | Dream \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Dream SMP Ensemble](#)  
Additional Tags: [Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers](#), [Implied/Referenced Child Abuse](#), [Traumatized TommyInnit \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [TommyInnit-centric \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Protective Wilbur Soot](#), [Hurt/Comfort](#), [Emotional Manipulation](#), [Possessive Behavior](#), [its all platonic though and pretty mild](#), [SHIPPERs DNI](#), [dont be weird](#), [Attempt at Humor](#), [Crack Treated Seriously](#), [Adoption](#), [Protective Technoblade \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Morally Ambiguous Character](#), [Families of Choice](#), [Oblivious TommyInnit \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [he's smart but when it comes to emotions he's just kinda like "????"](#), [Platonic Relationships](#), [BAMF Technoblade \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Unreliable Narrator](#), [Identity Reveal](#), [Sleepy Bois Inc as Family](#), [Temporary Character Death](#), [Villain Sleepy Bois Inc \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Angst with a Happy Ending](#), [Moth Hybrid TommyInnit \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [Greenhouse TommyInnit \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [fuck wilbur soot.](#), [SUPPORT VICTIMS](#), [FUCK WILLIAM GOLD](#)  
Language: English  
Series: Part 1 of [willow tree march](#)  
Collections: [Anonymous](#)  
Stats: Published: 2021-09-27 Updated: 2022-09-27 Words: 230,959 Chapters: 38/?

# butterflies and black & blue birds [on hiatus]

by Anonymous

## Summary

Tommy realized that *maybe* bringing a bleeding supervillain into his apartment at three in the morning was a terrible idea a little too late.

or, Tommy is an extremely tired citizen who wants to be as far away from villains and heroes as possible (and yet somehow he's a magnet for them).

or or, I'm following the hyperfixation and writing a villain!SBI and semi-citizen Tommy fic (:

## Notes

(fic title is from the song black & blue bird by dave matthews band <3)

\*sweats\* i should be working on my other fics but... i've been wanting to write a hero/villain fic for a while now so i kinda just gave in lmao

(if u saw me reupload this bc there was a weird formatting problem... aha no u didn't)

---

TWs: blood, stitching, phantom aches & pains, swearing (?), nightmares, vague panicking (let me know if i've forgotten any <3)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by [eneliii](#)
- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by [hedgehoggeryyy](#)

# pilot episode /hj

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy realized that *maybe* bringing a bleeding supervillain into his apartment at three in the morning was a terrible idea a little too late.

Oh, well. Not that he could do anything about it now that the Blade was watching him (or at least, he thought he was, it was hard to tell with the guy's big boar skull covering half of his face).

Tommy distracted himself from making any sort of eye contact with the villain, moving calmly around his kitchen, dousing a bloodied washcloth into the sink basin.

He'd already gone through the second most difficult step of dealing with the Blade; the guy letting him get close enough to clean the wound. It was on the Blade's side, right underneath his ribs, and when Tommy lifted up the man's black dress shirt he'd received a low growl before being allowed to examine the wound completely.

The next thing, though...

"I'm gonna need to do stitches," Tommy says, turning to give Blade a look. The man shifted a bit, but nodded vaguely.

Tommy hopped up onto his countertop, Blade turning to look at him again (his head tilted slightly, as if scrutinizing him), and Tommy shot him a glower before opening his cupboard and pulling out a tin first aid kit he kept at the very top.

He ignores the aching feeling in his back, biting the inside of his cheek as he hops down off of the countertop, hoping that the Blade doesn't notice the grimace making its way across his features.

Tommy brings the kit down and, paired with a freshly cleaned washcloth and bowl of water, he makes his way over to the sofa, setting both items onto the ground. It's times like this where he wished he had a coffee table to make this sort of stuff more accessible, but oh well.

He's learned to adapt.

Opening the first aid kit, Tommy took out the needle and thread, which he somehow used more frequently than he should. It's been a while since he's given someone (usually himself) stitches, but he knew that he'd grown so accustomed to it that it should just be second nature at this point.

Leaning forwards, he glanced up at the Blade, who inclined his head once, giving Tommy the permission to start sewing up his side.

It took a while, Tommy sticking his tongue between his teeth and furrowing his eyebrows together so he could properly weave the needle through flesh, until he'd finished and leaned back, his back hurting from staying forwards on his knees for so long.

"You should be alright to walk," Tommy says, grabbing the kit and bowl containing the cloth, "You are the Blade, after all. Everyone knows that healing quickly is basically your thing."

There's a rustle of clothing, and the Blade stands once Tommy's turned his back and gone back into the kitchen.

"Why did you save me?" the Blade asks, or rather blurts out. It feels like a question he'd been meaning to ask the whole time.

Tommy turns, glaring at him.

"That's a pretty stupid question," he responds, even though it really isn't. He knows it's a normal thing to ask, especially in this sort of case. It's not everyday you have a civilian saving a local top ranked supervillain.

The Blade recognizes this, too, tilting his head to the left while he examines the boy in front of him, before Tommy sighs.

“It’s not a big deal, *the Blade*,” Tommy responds truthfully with a shrug. He’s so nonchalant about it that Blade frowns, despite knowing the boy can’t see his face.

“Civilians don’t like villains,” Blade says matter-of-factly, and Tommy groans.

They always say that.

“I’m gonna be honest with you, I’ve never been a big fan of the whole ‘hero, villain hierarchy’ ideal,” Tommy admits, waving his hand, “Sure, it’s great and all that heroes save people, but they’re all so full of themselves that they spend more time worrying about if people are going to see them doing the good deed rather than actually caring about if the person’s alright. As for villains, sure, they’re wrong’uns, but I’ve *seen* the way you fight, Blade. You don’t like it when people get hurt, and always make sure someone’s okay if they end up in your crossfire.”

He sighs a bit before continuing, rubbing the back of his neck as if easing off a phantom pain, “You’re a ‘merciless killer’, they say, because that’s what they *want* the world to think in order to cover up for the actual good things you’ve done. The media doesn’t listen to villains who have a soft spot. They all only care about the stupid heroes who have stolen the limelight for years.”

The Blade doesn’t respond, shoulders unraveling a little bit, swaying on his feet. Tommy scoffs at the man being practically speechless.

Then again, most people are when Tommy goes off on these random tangents. He’s never understood it.

Maybe it just has to do with his stunning charisma.

“You watch me fight?” Blade asks suddenly, and Tommy’s nails dig into his palms. Fuck.

(Truthfully, he watched quite a few villains fight. They were... interesting to watch).

“Uh, a bit,” Tommy admits nervously, averting his eyes. He’s screwed. “Nothing weird, obviously, it’s just... fascinating, the way you fight. I guess. Don’t take it the wrong way, or I’ll clart you.”

The Blade huffs, and if Tommy had known any better, he’d take it as one of laughter.

The man walks forwards a bit, so that he’s standing right in front of Tommy. The latter gulps, taking in just how much the guy practically *towers* over him.

He can see why people take one look at this guy and immediately run in the opposite direction.

This height is unrealistic, really.

“What’s your name, kid?” the Blade wonders, voice genuine despite maintaining the monotone.

Tommy shifts on his feet, really debating about if he wants to tell this guy his name or not. On one hand, it’d probably not be a great thing for a number one ranked supervillain to know his name. On the other hand... does he really give a shit?

“Tommy,” The boy responds, focused on holding his ground and glaring up at the man, despite how his hand shakes under his sweater sleeve.

There's a pause, and the man tilts his head again. It almost seems like he's smiling, Tommy thinks to himself, but he wouldn't be able to tell with the black mask covering the lower half of the Blade's face (the part uncovered by the iconic skull helmet).

"Stay safe out there, Tommy," the Blade says, reaching out to pat the boy's head before whirling around, blood red cape trailing behind him as he heads for the front door. "Oh, and, uh, I'll be contactin' you soon."

At Tommy's confused (and vaguely fearful expression), Techno adds, "I do owe you, after all."

With a final click of the door closing and the scent of rust hitting Tommy in the face like a mallet, the Blade's gone.

And Tommy realizes all at once just how fucked he really is.

Glancing at his severely cracked phone with a grimace, he's got about four hours until his first shift the next day.

What a great way to spend his evening.

It should be fine, though. He's used to four hours of sleep.

---

*"It's your destiny to fall, Theseus." the voice says, the same one that haunts his dreams every night.*

*"I don't fall," he replies despite the way his voice trembles and breaks.*

*"We'll see about that," the voice croons, and then there's a palm against his chest, and—*

---

When Tommy wakes to a loud ringing noise coming from his battered phone - laying on the ground upside down from where it had undoubtedly dropped out of Tommy's hand the night before - and a severe migraine, he figures that he might as well just have died last night in his living room.

He also realizes that it is, in fact, *not* fine. He is completely exhausted.

*Oh, well*, is all he can really think, scowling upon realization he'd quite literally fallen asleep on the same sofa he had cleaned and stitched up a top ranking supervillain on.

Wonderful.

Almost as wonderful as the fact he had actually helped (and now had a token favour from) a legitimate supervillain.

Not that it mattered, really.

He already had his views pretty set in stone with the whole hero and villain thing.

Pretentious, the lot of them.

With careful ease, Tommy rolled off of the sofa, taking drawls of deep breaths before peeling off the now sticky shirt he'd fallen asleep in.

Nightmares sucked, especially ones about that *incident* in particular (even though really that's the only nightmares he had nowadays), but he'd long since learned to get over them.



Quickly, Tommy changes into a pair of non-sweaty clothing specifically for his two part-time jobs before all but dashing out of his flat, pulling at his shoe laces all the while.

The old bookstore he worked at for his first shift - Eldritch Wings, it was called - was just one hop and a train ride away from Tommy's flat. It wasn't too far, but far enough where a walk would probably invoke Tommy getting jumped (not that the Underground was any safer, but at least it was watched by security cameras).

Luckily for him, barely anyone from his district rode the train this early in the morning- anyone who did was usually just people like him, on their way to work, antsy and tapping their feet while glancing at their watch, or parents taking their children to school. (Tommy made sure to avert his eyes from the latter, hating the way his chest would pang longingly at the thought of *parents*).

It was the late night train rides Tommy had to worry about.

Everyone knew that "anytime after eight pm" was considered the "Villain's Hour" (or witching hour, vampire hour, etc. it all depended on who you asked, really).

Tommy, honestly, didn't give a flying *fuck* about what hour of the day it was. He knew what kind of people were out there and definitely knew how to fight them.

(Years of training helped that, a reminder of something that was never meant to be).

Even so, the night rides were dangerous, and Tommy always made sure he was wary of his surroundings at all times, even when he was busy immersed in a comic book (that he'd bought from the bookstore he worked at, even though he was more than certain Philza, the owner, would've just given it to him for free).

When he enters the bookstore - a ten or so minute walk from the Underground - he's filled with the overwhelmingly familiar scent of old books, freshly made tea (and espresso, to his

interest), and deep, dark wood. The bell jingles as he walks inside, and his shoulders relax ever so slightly at not being outside anymore.

“Hey, Tommy,” Karl, his coworker, calls from one of the bookshelves, grinning.

“Ayup,” Tommy responds quickly, shooting the guy a short smile. He’s always appreciated Karl—the guy’s funny and likes to talk about comic books with him a lot. Normally, Tommy hates any sort of literature (he can’t get his mind to focus on anything with too many words), but Karl always makes them seem so interesting, especially the ones based on time travel or the “alternate reality” theories.

(The guy also never hovers, unlike his coworker for his next job. He appreciates Karl a lot, honestly. It makes him feel less like a charity case).

Tommy takes his spot behind the register, slumping down onto the counter. This is probably his third (or fourth?) job working as a cashier. His other part-time job at a café (ironic, isn’t it?) involves him being a cashier as well.

Maybe it’s just his calling card, handling money and all.

Something particularly good about Eldritch Wings — the hours at the bookstore pass by quickly.

You’d think that with how little interest people normally have in books that the place would be empty, but strangely, it’s a rarity for Karl and Tommy to be the only people in the store.

Since it’s quite small, there aren’t a bunch of people crowded into the place, but that doesn’t change that there is still quite the amount of people.

It’s irritating but also exciting (bigger crowd = bigger paycheck, in Tommy’s eyes).

At half past two, Tommy is slumped against the counter, fiddling with a ballpoint pen, the sounds of people quietly talking slowly lulling him to sleep. It's nice, hearing people other than himself talk— almost comforting, in a weird sort of way.

(He always had kept the television on at night back in the Hero's Penthouse, the dull buzz of people laughing or speaking quietly over the box quickly comforting him into a comfortable rest. It sucked that he couldn't afford anything like that anymore, but at least he was... safe?)

"Hello," a melodic voice says, snapping him out of his thoughts and making him jump nearly five feet into the air.

He glares up at the speaker, his gaze only narrowing when he realizes he recognizes this guy.

He should, anyway. It's hard to forget someone who practically *looms* over you and dresses like a nineteenth century poet.

"I know you," Tommy blurts out, and the stranger(?)'s eyes lighten a little bit.

"I'm a regular at Nook's," the man explains, and Tommy grimaces. Oh, right. Now that he thinks about it, he remembers this guy a bit. He's the one always acting weird and emo in the corner.

Isn't he?

Or is that someone else?

Fucking hell, this migraine *sucks*.

It isn't hard to recognize that this guy's not exactly a "regular", either.

(At least, not for Tommy's shift, he isn't.)

"Okay," Tommy shrugs, turning back to lean down onto the desk.

A moment passes, and he groans.

"Can I help you with something?" he asks, making his tone sound sarcastically sweet, glancing up at the man who seems all too amused with this situation.

"That's pretty shit customer service," the poet dude points out and Tommy rolls his eyes.

*Prick.*

"Go complain to my boss about it or something, you tory," Tommy mutters, almost immediately regretting it. Honestly, it would suck if he lost this job— it's a good source of income, and he gets access to the books for an hour or so (if he finishes his job early).

Not that it matters, though — Tommy's boss is rarely around. The guy is either holed up in his study all day or out on business runs or whatever.

In fact, Tommy's only met Philza three times: once when he first applied and got accepted, once when he'd been given a free comic book out of nowhere, and another time when the guy literally came *bolting* through the bookstore to beat the shit out of some random person who had tried to talk lippy to Karl.

It was single handedly the coolest thing Tommy has ever seen.

(No, he didn't idolize his boss. Shut up).

To his surprise, though, the poet dude just starts laughing at the insult, albeit glaring at Tommy (with no real venom behind it).

“I’m not a fucking tory, you child,” he hisses, and Tommy can feel a slight shiver go up his spine, despite how he knows the man’s clearly joking.

“Sounds like something a tory would say,” Tommy quips, holding a finger up to point at the guy, who bristles. “Also, not a child.”

“I- well- you *are* a child, I can see it.”

“I’m eighteen, dickhead.”

(Not entirely true— Tommy’s sixteenth birthday was a couple months away, but he’d say anything to keep a steady flow of income going).

The man hums, scrutinizing him as though he doesn’t believe him, but it’s replaced with annoyance quickly.

“Whatever you say, gremlin,” the man taps his fingers against the desk rhythmically. Tommy really is too tired for this shit.

“So, can I help you?” Tommy repeats, not bothering to hide the exhaustion in his tone anymore.

“What’s your name?”

Tommy grimaces.

“I don’t see how that’s important? Kinda stalkerish of you, big man.”

“I’m just curious,” The poet dude holds his hands up, despite grinning a little. He eventually relents, after seeing Tommy’s unimpressed expression. “Fine, alright— have you got any good copies of Greek mythology?”

Tommy blinks.

“Really? Greek mythology?” he whistles, glancing up at the ceiling as he thinks about a strangely large amount of titles relating to that genre. Again, he isn’t *fond* of reading per se, but it’s easy to memorize book titles after stacking them on shelves for a while. “I would’ve taken you for a poet kinda person. Shakespeare and stuff.”

“It’s for my brother,” The man waves his hand, despite the small smile tugging at his lips from Tommy’s words, “But, no, uh, I don’t really read much. I prefer looking at music scores, or listening to audio books.”

Tommy perks up at this.

“Really? I’m the same way,” Tommy comments, and the guy smiles at him fondly.

“You like music scores?”

“Uh, well,” Tommy laughs nervously. He’d never actually seen a music score before, nor learned any kind of instrument. “I meant listening to audio books.”

“Oh,” The man nods, his face falling a little, “Have you got a favourite book, then?”

Tommy frowns a bit as he gets up from behind the counter, walking towards the many bookshelves, “Not really, actually.”

“That’s a surprise, since you work in a bookstore and all,” The man comments, following Tommy close behind, hands pushed into the pockets of his enormous brown trench coat (that somehow fits him perfectly, the tall wanker). “Can I ask your name now?”

“No,” Tommy responds simply, frowning up at the large bookshelf in front of him, eyes narrowed as he searches each of them for the right title.

“Aw, don’t trust me?” The man teases, voice lilting as he leans back against the bookshelf behind him.

Tommy rolls his eyes.

“No, you’re just a dickhead,” Tommy hums, reaching out to pull the iron ladder across the bookshelves towards the book that had caught his eye. He begins scaling it, ignoring the wounded noise the (not?) poet man lets out.

Tommy hums under his breath to himself, reaching out to grab the book labeled *The Iliad*, grasping it by the spine and turning to face the stranger over his shoulder.

“Catch,” Tommy deadpans before dropping the book into the guy’s hands. He relishes the shocked expression crossing the man’s face briefly, snickering when it’s closely replaced with irritation.

“You’re such a *child*,” The poet man grumbles, staring at the book in his hands as Tommy slides down the ladder with ease, chuckling still.

(He tries to not grimace when practically his whole body aches from the action).

“I literally already told you that I was eighteen, asshat,” Tommy comments brightly, patting the tall man on the shoulder.

(He's decided he must hold a grudge upon anyone who makes him stand on the tips of his toes in order to pat their shoulder).

"Somehow I doubt that," The poet man narrows his eyes suspiciously, taking in Tommy's stature.

Tommy just scoffs, heading towards another bookshelf, motioning to it with his hand,

"Did you need anything else?"

"Unless you've got white Monster Energy stored underneath the front desk, no."

"Yikes," Tommy grimaces, looking up at the man, blue eyes meeting a very strangely familiar brown. "You're so *emo*."

He snaps his fingers together suddenly, as if having an epiphany, "I can refer you to a therapist if you'd like."

(Not that Tommy goes to therapy. He just happens to know someone).

"I hate therapy."

"No shit," Tommy exhales, eyebrows raised as he takes his spot behind the counter again. "That'll be £10 pounds, by the way."

---



“You are in debt to a child?” Wilbur squawks, eyes wide as his twin brother slumps down onto the sofa, grunting a bit.

“Don’t act so surprised,” Techno responds, ever so blasé.

“Technoblade, you literally *almost died* last night and then come home this morning to tell me that a literal teenager saved your life out of purely the goodness of their heart and you tell me not to be surprised?” Wilbur all but shrieks.

Techno wonders how the neighbors haven’t alerted the police yet.

Then again, Wilbur has these fits often. He’s got a flair for the dramatic.

“I would’ve told you last night, but you were asleep,” Techno sighs, “Plus, you were already gone by the time I woke up this morning. And, to be fair, I didn’t ‘almost die’. Technoblade never dies.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t *here* because I went book shopping,” Wilbur seethes, rustling through the plastic bag tossed over his arm, pulling out the novel he’d gotten from the absolute gremlin kid behind the register. He tosses it at Techno, who catches it easily, examining the cover with great interest.

“You went book shopping?” Techno snorts despite the way he looks fondly over the cover of the novel.

“Yes, I did,” Wilbur crosses his arms proudly. He’s decided not to argue with the whole ‘Technoblade never dies’ motto. Smart of him.

“What for? You hate reading.”

“That’s not true! I enjoy reading some books!”

“If some books are just NatGeo Wild magazines, then sure.”

Wilbur glares at him for a moment before snatching the book out of his hands, “Fine, then, if you’re gonna be a bitch, I’m tossing this out the window.”

“Nooo, how could you,” Techno drawls, expression blank.

“I fucking hate you,” Wilbur mutters, pausing for a moment before tossing the book back at his brother, “and for the record, I went there because I was worried for my dear brother and thought I’d get you something instead of sitting by your bed all morning in a frenzy.”

“Thanks, Wil,” Techno huffs, and it’s genuine.

Wilbur relaxes a bit.

“No problem,” he responds, “Even if I did have to deal with an absolute gremlin child just to get it.”

Techno snorts.

“They were that bad?”

“Horrendous. I’m never going back there.”

---

“You’re late,” Niki comments kindly from behind the cafe counter, slipping the apron off from around her neck.

She sends a smile in Tommy’s direction, patting the boy’s curls as he passes by.

“Sorry, sorry,” Tommy sighs, pulling the baking apron over his head, hands dragging down his face miserably. He had been last to lock up at Eldritch Wings after Karl had left early for a date or something. “You can head out now for your break, Niki, I’ve got it.”

Niki hums in response, her face looking almost sympathetic as she walks towards the back room.

“Make sure you actually take a break at some point, okay?” she asks, glancing over her shoulder at him. “You look exhausted, Tommy.”

“I’m not a *baby*, Niki, I’ll be okay,” Tommy responds with a shrug, before clearing his throat, “But, uhm. Thanks for the concern or something.”

Niki flashes him another smile. It’s brighter than the previous ones.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” she says, and then pauses again, sighing almost like a big sister would before scolding their younger brother, “And for the love of Prime, *please* try not to get into any more arguments, okay?”

“No promises,” Tommy muses, leaning against the baking counter as the bell jingles when Niki exits, laughing lightly at him.

He slumps even further after she has left, his breath leaving with a fail swoop. The night shift is so *boring*. Nine pm until two-thirty am or so of mostly just standing around. Nothing interesting happens this late, but Tommy doesn’t mind it.

It's better than having a night shift rush (which happens a couple times a week or so, making Tommy all but collapse once he gets back to his flat).

The steady flow of customers enters - Tommy instantly recognizes the few regulars, tossing only a few of them the ghost of a smile.

Around twelve am, he's wiping down a diner table when the bell jingles again, and he glances up.

"How can I—"

His words die in his mouth and his eyes narrow at the recognizable brown styled curls falling over a face, long trenchcoat flowing around his ankles.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Tommy mumbles under his breath, turning back to wipe the table down more aggressively.

He can't avoid it forever, though, eventually slinking over behind the counter to glare dangerously at the man from the bookstore, who looks equally as bewildered to see him.

"What can I get for you?" Tommy asks, taking on a sweet, lilted tone.

"You—" The man begins, spluttering a bit.

"Me," Tommy repeats boredly, slamming his hand on the counter. "So are you gonna order or just stare at me like I've grown three heads?"

The man glowers and then relents after a few moments, "Fine. Get me two black americanos. No sugar or milk."

Tommy grimaces, grabbing two styrofoam cups and a Sharpie. He isn't surprised— the guy's totally the type to order just two black coffees and then dip. "Name?"

The man straightens, "Wilbur."

"Understandable," Tommy hums, and the man - Wilbur? - frowns.

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, nothing," Tommy shrugs, smirking to himself as he writes *Dickhead* on the cups.

"Well," Wilbur scoffs, sounding strangely affronted, "Since you know my name now, don't you think I deserve to know yours?"

"Nope," Tommy says, popping the 'p'.

"Fine, then I guess I'll just have to think of a name for you," Wilbur leans against the front counter, squinting at Tommy.

Tommy grimaces, turning from the coffee maker, "*Please* don't."

Wilbur hums, head tilted, "Alright, why don't you give me a name then so I don't have to just call you 'gremlin child'?"

*How many times do I have to tell you I'm eighteen for you to believe it,* Tommy thinks to himself bitterly.

"Just call me..." Tommy scrunches up his nose, clicking his tongue as he puts a lid on Wilbur's coffee cup before making the second, "Biggest man you've ever met, amazing,

awesome, and handsome. Or, like, Big T or something.”

“That’s... a mouthful,” Wilbur makes a face, and then something smug changes in his expression that makes Tommy shift uncomfortably.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?” Tommy puts the coffee cup on the counter in front of Wilbur, turning back to the maker to pull the second one from it.

“Oh, no reason,” Wilbur says in a sing-songy voice, Tommy grimacing all the while putting a lid on the second coffee. “*Timmy*.”

The fuck?

“Who the fuck is *Timmy*?”

Wilbur blinks.

“Not that one then,” he says, looking slightly crestfallen.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You said ‘Big T’,” Wilbur comments, taking a swig of his coffee, before he grins mischievously at Tommy. “That means your name starts with a T.”

“How do you know that?” Tommy bristles, setting the second coffee down in front of Wilbur rather aggressively. “What if- you know, what if that’s just my last name? Or just my nickname?”

“Hmm,” Wilbur shrugs, looking at the second cup and noticing the name on the side with a dip in his smug smile, “I’ll take my chances.”

Tommy rolls his eyes, running a hand through his curls.

“Why did you write *Dickhead on my cup?*” Wilbur whines, twisting so the name Tommy had Sharpied on is visible.

“Why are you getting a black coffee at this ungodly hour?” Tommy rebuttals with a smirk. “Also, because it’s true. You are a dickhead.”

“I usually come in the mornings, actually,” Wilbur admits, looking slightly sheepish. He’s decided to ignore the end of Tommy’s sentence, probably for his own good. “My brother’s the one who drinks coffee this late.”

“I figured you did,” Tommy responds with a slight hum.

He frowns a bit, though.

He’s *seen* Wilbur in here before, he knows he has, but he can’t remember when. Maybe it was one time before he left for Niki’s shift?

Not that it matters, really.

“Do you work two part-time jobs?” Wilbur frowns at him, the question coming out of nowhere.

The guy keeps asking dumbass questions.

Tommy just wants him to take his two black coffees and leave.

“Obviously.”

“Isn’t that a little... much for a kid?”

“Fucking hell— I’ve told you, like, three times that I’m eighteen, get it into your head, bitch.”

Wilbur just hums, seemingly unfazed.

“Why doesn’t your boss make you guys wear name tags?” he comments, eyes flitting down to Tommy’s apron where a name tag would normally be.

“He does, actually,” Tommy grins at him, turning away so he can begin cleaning the coffee machine, jaw clenching slightly when his back aches in response, “I just don’t wear them because I’m too cool for one.”

Wilbur scoffs behind him, “I should’ve guessed you would say that.”

“Yeah, you probably should have. Now can you please leave? I’ve got shit to do.”

“You didn’t give me a drink carrier,” Wilbur complains, his tone akin to a whine.

Tommy turns to grin sweetly at him, “Suffer, then.”



i hope u enjoyed reading !! i'm really tired but man... villain!sbi fics have got me by the neck rn so i wanted to contribute.

also ! i write & post every chapter on my phone so apologies if there's any typos / weird grammar mishaps or anything <3 pls lmk if u see any (but pls not too much criticism, im already petrified of the comments section lmao)

stay safe <3

# ice cream doesn't solve my mental issues but it sure can try

## Chapter Summary

Tommy might just die.

Tubbo, obviously, wants him dead.

“Tubbo, you’re a lifesaver and the best person to ever exist,” Tommy says, eyes wide as he examines the ice cream on the table in front of him.

or, a bit of a filler chapter w/ clingyduo content, twinsduo, crimeboys, & 3/4 sbi (:

## Chapter Notes

i decided to post this mostly bc it’s filler content (not rlly much plot) & just to say ??? hello ??? the amount of hits this had actually jumpscared me /pos tysm )):

also, i have no posting schedule so apologies for uh. that lmao

anyways... i’m too broke for a l’mantooz. it’s very upsetting

---

TWs: nightmare (at beginning of chapter), mentions of phantom pains & bruising, mentions of blood later on in chap, cursing (?), DEATH JOKE (it’s mild & at the end of the chapter).

(pls lmk if i should add more, ty<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*It’s cold.*

*The only thing he can hear is the wind whipping through his ears and the sound of someone screaming.*

*It's dark.*

*He's really cold.*

---

Tommy's back hurts.

He should be used to it by now, the aching pains that echo through his spine. He'd never admit that he feels it - only being able to tell from an outside source each time the boy grimaces - but with a clenched fist and bared teeth, he pushes through it.

"You've got that look again," Tubbo comments from the other side of the room where he's splayed out on the sofa upside down, head tilted as he looks curiously at Tommy.

"What look?"

"Is it your back?" Tubbo ignores his question, frowning a bit with sympathy.

Tommy clenches his jaw.

He doesn't need anyone's fuckin' sympathy, thank you very much.

“My back’s fine, Tubbo, quit worrying,” he sighs, rubbing his face a bit. It’s Sunday: one out of three days he has off from work. He probably should be spending it doing this normal teenagers do, but honestly?

His body still aches horribly and he would probably keel over and just shrink into the floor if he were to do anything strenuous like going to the park.

Tubbo, luckily, is very adaptive in these situations.

While the kid is highly active and would probably drag Tommy outside if he wanted to (he could, honestly), Tubbo’s also pretty understanding when it comes to having just a “shit and exhausted day.”

Tommy’s known Tubbo for a while — not too long, but long enough for him to have a simple understanding of how the guy works.

“Should I call Boo?” Tubbo hums, slinking down the sofa so that his arms hang over his head, face slowly turning red from hanging upside down so much.

Tommy’s nose shrivels at the thought.

Ranboo, Tubbo’s roommate, is probably one of the most annoyingly endearing people on the planet.

If there’s one person that Tommy would rather murder than see, it would probably be that guy.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Tubbo sighs loudly, falling the rest of the way off the sofa so he’s crumpled in a way that his torso is on the ground but his legs remain in the air, feet touching the back cushion of the couch, “But, look, Tommy, I know this is probably not gonna get into your head because it’s coming from me and you’re stubborn as shit, but you gotta start taking more breaks. These jobs are gonna kill you, you know.”

*No, I'll probably be dead before it gets the chance,* Tommy thinks bitterly.

“I might,” is all he says instead, knowing full well that he probably won’t.

Work keeps him on his feet, keeps the bills paid, keeps him laying low and his mind off of reality.

Tubbo just hums again, clearly not believing him but deciding that arguing is futile.

“Do you wanna go get ice cream or something, then?” he asks.

“I probably don’t have the money for that—”

“I’m paying, dickhead,” Tubbo scoffs, as if that was plainly obvious.

Tommy blinks.

“What? Why? If this is some weird thing to get me into your debt, I really don’t want to touch even the mere *idea* of that with a ten meter stick—”

“No, no, it’s nothing to do with that,” Tubbo waves him off, getting to his feet and stumbling a bit, catching himself on the drywall with a mischievous grin that makes Tommy shift uncomfortably. “Just me being a kind, loving friend as always.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that, and- and when you try to get me involved with one of your weird shitty schemes, I’m gonna remind you that you said that.”

Tubbo just grins.

---

Wilbur slumps down onto the sofa beside his twin, groaning dramatically and tossing his head back against the cushion.

“Technoooo,” he drawls, sounding utterly defeated, “I need your help with something.”

“No,” Techno responds immediately, eyes not even flicking up from the book he’s reading.

“Pleaseeeee?” Wilbur pleads.

“No. Ask Phil if you want someone dead this time.”

“I don’t want someone dead, you idiot,” Wilbur hisses, snapping his head up to glare at Techno, who shrugs.

“That’s what you normally come to me about, don’t blame me for assumin’.”

“Yeah, well, this time is serious, uhm, real world shit,” Wilbur grins at his wording, as if it made perfect sense.

Techno glances up from his book just to deadpan him.

“By ‘real word shit,’ do you mean just *normal civilian things*?”

Wilbur snaps his fingers enthusiastically, “Yes! That. That’s what I meant.”

“Then no. I’m not interested.”

Wilbur deflates, “But you haven’t even heard what it is I need help with yet.”

“As soon as you confirmed it was weird civilian stuff, I lost interest.”

“It’s not my fault you’re only interested when it’s stuff about hybrids or villains and heroes,” Wilbur sniffs, turning his head.

“Wil, everyone in this entire family is a supervillain hybrid. Obviously I’d be more focused on that genre of things than whatever is goin’ on in what you call the ‘real world’.”

Wilbur sighs, defeated.

“Fine, then will you at least *listen* to what I’ve got to say?”

Techno hums in affirmation.

That’s the good thing about the guy; even if he couldn’t care less about what you’re saying, he’s a great listener.

“So, basically, I met this child at a bookstore and he’s kind of funny,” Wilbur begins, “You know, the old one that dad runs down the street just for fun or something?”

Techno rolls his eyes, “Yes, Wil, I’m aware of Eldritch Wings.”

“Right, so, there’s this kid that works there that’s pretty funny, but also the bane of my existence. I absolutely despise him, and I thought that would be the last I saw of him, but he also works at Nook’s for the late night shift.”

“So?”

“So…” Wilbur trails off, blinking.

Techno sighs.

“Wil, *please* do not get attached to some random child.”

“I’m not getting attached!”

“Then why did you just make me listen to your random babblings about some kid I’ve never met and that you’ve only met, like, twice?”

“That’s the thing, though! I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him before, but I don’t know where,” Wilbur frowns a bit now, thinking hard. “It’s like seeing an actor in a movie that looks sort of familiar but you can’t quite place what movie you’ve seen them in before.”

“The difference here is you can look up their name,” Techno chimes in.

Wilbur snaps his fingers, “That’s another thing! He wouldn’t give me his name.”

Techno hums, looking up at Wilbur, shutting his book closed, “You said he works at Eldritch Wings?”

“Yeah?”



Techno's got a ghost of a smile on his face when he stands up, patting Wilbur on the shoulder lightly.

"Why don't you just ask Phil for his name, then? Pretty sure he just happens to know who owns the place."

Wilbur blinks as realization dawns on him.

"Idiot."

"Fuck you."

---

Tommy might just die.

Tubbo, obviously, wants him dead.

"Tubbo, you're a lifesaver and the best person to ever exist," Tommy says, eyes wide as he examines the ice cream on the table in front of him.

It's mint chocolate chip with rainbow sprinkles.

"Thanks, big man," Tubbo says sincerely, grinning from across the table where he's eating some weird ice cream named after a high ranked hero Tommy can't recall the name of. "I hope it helps a bit with the pains and all that."

“Yeah, it’s subsiding a bit,” Tommy lies, sending a smile in Tubbo’s direction.

The pain never really leaves, no matter how much medication he takes.

(He gets a decent flow of supply from Quackity, who always gives him these stupid ass sympathetic looks whenever he delivers them like Tommy’s some *charity case*. It’s all so patronizing it makes Tommy want to punch someone).

“That’s good,” Tubbo hums, now eyeing Tommy’s hair, “Maybe after ice cream I can help with your hair or something?”

He motions towards Tommy’s curls, who gasps and recoils, clutching the front of his bangs, “What’s wrong with my hair?”

“Tommy, your red tips are fading and your hair has grown out to the point where you could probably tie it back into a ponytail.”

“They are not! And ponytails are poggers so fuck off.”

“They’re turning pink because someone is always being a bitch about Ranboo coming over and won’t let me, who is perfectly capable of dying your hair, even *touch* it.”

Tommy makes a face, arms crossed.

It had become a routine with the three - dying their hair every time they hang out.

Something like a tradition, if you will.

Tubbo always got the blonde tips (that made Tommy laugh), and Ranboo always kept up with the strange... dual-toned hair or whatever the fuck he called it.

Tommy, of course, picked the most poggers of hair dye. *Red* tips.

“No. Never. Only *Ranboo*’s allowed to dye my hair. I don’t trust you holding scissors or a bottle of dye at all, Tubso,” Tommy recalls, earning a groan from Tubbo. He then frowns, “And don’t call me a bitch, bitch boy.”

Tubbo’s smile slips off his face a bit, almost like a pout.

“Well- no, okay, look-” Tommy begins, laughing nervously. “It’s just, you know—”

It’s scary when Tubbo gets like this.

“You said you didn’t *want* me to invite Ranboo earlier! You never want him over, it’s just like I was saying! This is why your fucking hair dye never stays!”

“I didn’t, I didn’t want Ranboo over, you’re right! I just want to hang out with *you*, big man! No need to be so *clingy* about it, though.”

Tubbo huffs, clearly knowing that this is a losing argument.

Before Tommy can continue with his rambling, (mostly about how much of a bitch Ranboo is and how Tubbo is cooler, but not as cool as Tommy himself obviously), Tubbo’s phone rings.

He glances at the contact name, then worriedly at Tommy, as if debating if he should pick up the call or not around him.

Tommy just stares at him, eyebrow raised.

“Gimme a minute, Toms,” Tubbo says, rising out of his chair in front of the ice cream parlor and walking a bit down the sidewalk, hand pressed over his mouth, “To what do I owe the pleasure, boss man...!”

*Weird*, is all Tommy thinks, shrugging.

Maybe he’s talking to Ranboo about random platonic marriage things.

Hopefully divorce!

At least Tommy can eat his free ice cream in peace (and maybe sneak a bite from Tubbo’s while he’s gone).

“Touch my ice cream and you’re dead!” Tubbo squawks over his shoulder, Tommy flinching in response.

Okay, maybe not.

....

Tommy will, decidedly, take his chances.

He positions his hand over the ice cream, smirking a little, when his *own* phone rings.

The classic Able Sisters ringtone on full blast.

He drops his spoon onto the linoleum table with a clatter, shooting a middle finger at anyone who's giving him weird looks before picking up the phone.

With one look at the contact name, he almost hangs up.

He *almost* sends the fucker right to voice mail.

But, well. He'd have hell to pay later.

Tommy decides that he is too tired for this shit and presses answer.

"Heyyy, Jack," he grits out into the phone, his tone faux enthusiastic. He drags a hand down his face.

"Tommy!" Jack's smug voice comes through the line. "Hey man, how are ya, are you busy right now?"

"I'm always busy, you fucker."

"Yeah, well, put a pause on it, alright? I've got to leave work early today and need you to take my shift."

Tommy's nose wrinkles immediately. No way in hell is he doing that.

"Why me? I thought Niki was on call for daytime shifts this weekend?"

"She *was*, but she's occupied right now."

“The fuck? I’m occupied right now, too.”

“Do you want me to get Sam involved?”

Fuck’s sake.

Tommy clenches his jaw, eyes flicking over to Tubbo, who is still talking to someone on the phone animatedly.

“No, it’s- it’s *fine*, ” Tommy grumbles. “Just- just give me like thirty minutes and I’ll be there.”

“Great! Knew I could count on you, champ.”

“If you call me champ again, I’ll smash your bald head like an egg.”

Jack just laughs and then the line goes dead.

Asshole.

---

Tommy sulks into Nook’s twenty minutes later, slouched over and glaring daggers in Jack’s direction, who slips off his apron the second Tommy was even in sight of the bakery.

“Good to see you could make it,” he grins at Tommy.

“Fuck you.”

“Aw, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed or something?”

“I’ll kill you,” Tommy plasters on a sweet smile, clapping his hands together, “I’ll literally end you right here and now. No more Jack Manifold. Bye bye, bald boy.”

Jack snorts, “Whatever you say.”

With a slap on the back (that sends Tommy almost to his knees), Jack exits the front doors of the bakery, leaving Tommy with both the afternoon and (most likely) the evening shift all in one.

He grumbles insults under his breath, thinking back to what Tubbo had said when he’d told him the news.

On one hand, he looked vaguely sympathetic (they both knew Tommy rarely got any “off days” from his two jobs), but he also looked a bit relieved at the news, claiming that he also had somewhere to be.

Fuck all of them and their “places to be”.

Tommy exhales, leaning against the front counter of the bakery.

Jack was lucky it was a slow day — if it wasn’t, Tommy probably would track him down and murder him.

Maybe sic Tubbo on him or something.

“You alright kid?” a voice asks behind him and Tommy shrieks, hands slapping the counter in front of him, whirling around.

Sam frowns, head tilted— he’s wearing his normal clothes and an apron covered in flour. His brown hair (with green tips that Tommy has compared his own red ones to a couple of times) is even dusted lightly in the faux snow.

“Fucking hell, man!” Tommy laughs shakily, a hand pressed to his chest as he inhales deeply. He can smell the freshly baked bread in the back room. “You can’t just scare someone like that! What the hell?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Sam chuckles a bit, holding his hands up, “I was just making sure you were alright. I felt bad that Jack called you in on such short notice.”

“Yeah, he threatened to get you involved.”

Sam raises an eyebrow, amused, “That’s what got you to rush here?”

“I thought that if you were here that maybe you’d have brought Fran,” Tommy admits, turning back around so he can face the front of the store, chin resting in the middle of his hands.

“Not today I didn’t,” Sam responds, patting Tommy gently on the forearm sympathetically, “I’ll make sure to remember next time for you, though, kiddo.”

“Thanks,” Tommy mutters, ears burning.

Sam’s one of the only people that has ever called him *kiddo*. It’s nice, he thinks. Maybe.

“I’ll be in the back if you need any extra help, alright?” Sam gives him a kind smile, “Don’t be afraid to ask. I don’t bite.”



“Yeah, yeah, go do old man shit,” Tommy waves him off.

He should be fine, really.

If there isn’t a big rush this late in the afternoon, then there probably won’t be one at all.

---

Tommy should’ve known this sort of thing would happen.

It’s really just his luck, too.

Wilbur grins at him from the other side of the counter. He looks a bit different today: he’s wearing a beanie that practically smushes his mop of curls to death and his regular circular glasses (that scream english major) have been replaced for ones with a red tint.

He looks *ridiculous*.

“You look ridiculous,” Tommy states just so he knows too.

“Gee, thanks,” Wilbur huffs, “And here I thought we were starting to get along.”

“I’ve only spoken to you twice. What gave you that idea?”

“Just an epiphany I had,” Wilbur shrugs, and then he frowns a bit, “Do you normally work at this time on the weekends?”

“I was called in,” Tommy grits through his teeth, eyes narrowing, “Do you want your same two black coffees?”

“Make it three,” Wilbur’s smile only grows when Tommy’s eye twitches, “Sucks to hear you were called in, though. I hate when that happens.”

“*You* have a job?” Tommy snorts at the very thought. He must be a super fun person to deal with if he works in customer services. It takes half of Tommy’s strength to not laugh at the picture of this tall lanky motherfucker trying to keep his cool while people yell at him for doing something wrong.

“Yep!” Wilbur responds rather enthusiastically, sounding unfazed to Tommy’s sarcasm.

Tommy decides to ignore him in order to make his coffee. It’s strangely weird how *chipper* the guy is. Out of character, if you will.

And to think Tommy was having such a nice day before Jack Manifold and this fucker decided to ruin it. Saddening.

“It’s pretty empty in here,” Wilbur clicks his tongue, glancing around at the empty tables, eyeing the only one that has a regular sitting in it? fast asleep against the wall.

Oh, they’re doing conversation still?

“That’s what happens on Sundays. Everyone’s out doing Prime knows what. Food places are empty and shit.”

“So why are you stuck in here?”

*Way to rub it in, prick.*

“I already told you I was *called in*,” Tommy seethes, scrawling *Fuckface* on the coffee cup before placing it on the countertop, “If it were my choice, I’d be out clubbing and getting all the women to flock to me. No need to be such a tory and rub it in my face.”

Wilbur cackles, “You have women that flock to you?”

“It’s true, you know. It’s just- It’s just my charm and extreme handsomeness.”

“You’re- you’re a child, though. An itty bitty man.”

“I resent that, I am actually tall,” Tommy starts up immediately, scrawling another insult on the second coffee cup, “I’m like, six foot three, you know? I’m gigantic. I could probably squash you with my hand, if you think about it. Plus, not a child.”

“Six foot three?” Wilbur barks out a laugh — it’s one full of warmth and something genuine. It shouldn’t make a curl of pride appear in Tommy’s chest, really. “You— that’s a joke, right? You’re joking?”

“No, I’m not fuckin’ *joking*,” Tommy glares at him, slamming the third coffee cup down, “I’m dead serious. Completely serious. Can’t you see it in my eyes?”

Wilbur stares at him for a moment, squinting his brown eyes at him.

(At least, Tommy thinks they’re brown. It’s hard to tell with his stupid glasses).

The guy even leans down so that him and Tommy are almost eye level, before grinning, “No. Nah. You’re like... five foot nine at maximum.”

“Get the hell out of my shop.”

“You can’t just keep kicking me out when I’m right!”

“Yes, I can, and you aren’t right, you’re completely wrong,” Tommy smiles at him, tilting his head, “I can actually just get my manager and have him throw you out if I wanted to.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, “Holy shit, fine. That won’t be necessary, I’ll just be on my way with my three cups of black coffee.”

Tommy makes a face at the mention of the wretched coffee.

“You know if you drink that all at once it might kill you,” he suggests. He’s so great, giving this advice to his mortal enemy.

As with most things, he regrets it almost immediately.

“Aww, do you care about me? Are you worried about my health? That’s so sweet of you, Tommy,” Wilbur’s smirk is a mixture of victory laced with pure ire.

Wait.

Hold up.

Backtrack.

What the fuck.

“How the- what the fuck- *how do you know my name?*” Tommy hisses. He can feel his instincts telling him to run, to bolt, to leave town and never come back (like he should’ve six months ago), but he remains standing his ground.

“I have my resources,” Wilbur shrugs ominously, balancing the three coffee cups in his arms. “Those resources being Philza.”

*Fucking hell.*

Tommy relaxes immediately, exhaling.

“What the— that’s so fucking grim, man, you can’t just say that kind of shit!” Tommy points at him accusingly. Wilbur just laughs at him hysterically.

“Sorry, man.”

He doesn’t sound sorry in the slightest.

“I actually hate you. I hate you and your fucking dumb hair. Leave and never come back.”

Wilbur gasps, “How dare you? I’ll complain, you know, and have you fired.”

Tommy smiles sweetly again, “Die.”

Wilbur snorts.

Tommy really can’t seem to grasp how the guy finds this all *amusing*.

“Alright, gremlin, I’m leaving, holy shit,” Wilbur readjusts the coffee cups in his arms for a couple seconds, and his eyebrows furrow. “So, uh, could you possibly give me a—”

“Go away.”

“Alright.”

---

Wilbur’s grin is triumphant when he returns to the rooftop, arms full of coffee that look dangerously close to spilling.

“Wil, mate,” Phil frowns, walking forwards to carefully remove one of the cups from the man’s arms, “Where the fuck have you been? Tech and I have been trying to call you for like, twenty minutes.”

Wilbur shrugs, “I was busy.”

“He was probably talkin’ to that kid he’s got this weird obsession with,” Techno pipes up, walking across the rooftop while absentmindedly trying to dust blood off of the front of his outfit.

Phil sighs, taking a small sip of his coffee.

“I don’t have obsessions!”

“That’s what they all say.”

“Why is this coffee black?” Phil says suddenly, making a face. “You know my coffee order is with a lot of milk and sugar.”

Wilbur grins dangerously, “I wanted to see the look of despair on Tommy’s face when I ordered three black coffees instead of two.”

Phil’s wonders if he should retire early.

## Chapter End Notes

wilbur, the second he sees tommy: him. thats him. i want HIM as my little brother.

tommy, just trying to live his life: why do i hear boss music

i’m super tired but here. take another chapter lmao. i kinda rushed through this one so it sucks, sorry abt that ):

i got the idea for tommy having red tips from today’s origins stream when he was messing with his LEDs lmao. i took one look at that part and said “... let’s add it to the fic” and now it’s j kinda there lmao

also tubbo’s here!!! yay!!!

sorry that there wasn’t much plot content lmaoo, i hope u enjoyed all the same (:

# **i did not call you dad, no i did not**

## Chapter Summary

“Fuck do you wan’?” he slurs out to the figure, which he can’t seem to make out.

His mind’s still all wavery n shit, like he’s in a dream.

The guy in front of him is tall, way too tall, and is wearing some sort of... cape? Plus a mask? And... is that a crown?

Tommy puts two and two together when he realizes that the “mask” is actually a boar skull and just about dies right there on the front doorstep.

“Holy fucking shit,” Tommy states eloquently.

or, bedrock bros (?) content, charlie slimecicle makes his debut, and very vague content stuff for all those awesamdad truthers out there

## Chapter Notes

i’m so tired & kinda hate this chapter but

take content <3

---

TWs: mentions of scent of blood, swords/sword fighting, cursing (pls lmk if i missed any)



Tommy wakes up rather abruptly at four am to a loud knock at his front door.

He just about falls off of his sofa when he hears it, stumbling through the darkness of his apartment and all but throwing the front door open, blearily blinking up at the large guy looming over him.

Forgive him for not looking through the door's peephole for once in his life.

He's only had, like, two hours of sleep.

(Blame late night shifts and almost getting mugged in an alleyway for that one).

"Fuck do you wan'?" he slurs out to the figure, which he can't seem to make out.

His mind's still all wavery n shit, like he's in a dream.

The guy in front of him is tall, way too tall, and is wearing some sort of... cape? Plus a mask? And... is that a crown?

Tommy puts two and two together when he realizes that the "mask" is actually a boar skull and just about dies right there on the front doorstep.

"Holy fucking shit," Tommy states eloquently, now fully awake as if someone had tossed a bucket of water onto him.

The man scoffs a bit, "Forget about me already?"

"Oh piss off, man. It's like, four am. You just woke me up, you prick."

The Blade freezes a bit, seeming to gaze over his bed head and wrinkled clothes, “Oh. Uh... sorry.”

Yikes.

“You really need to freshen up on your apologizing skills, Blade,” Tommy tells him.

“You’re the second person to say that,” the man mutters. “Also, you’re not wearing normal sleep clothes, so it was difficult to tell.”

Oh, right. Tommy had nearly forgotten that the second he’d gotten home he all but passed out on his face without bothering to change.

Oops.

“Why the fuck are you at my house, big man?” Tommy splutters in order to change the subject.

It works, to his surprise.

“Looks like an apartment to me,” the Blade hums.

“And I’m here because I have a debt to repay, remember? I’m here to discuss it with you.”

Smartass.

“Yeah, well, *fuck* your debt. I don’t need anything.”

The Blade tilts his head dangerously.

Tommy's not scared.

Not at all.

“Really? There's absolutely nothing you want?” The Blade muses, his tone edging on shocked (if that's possible. The guy rarely sounds anything more than monotoned).

Tommy narrows his eyes at him for a moment.

The Blade probably won't leave him alone about this whole “debt” thing.

If there's anyone in his little villain cult or club or frat thing (Tommy couldn't care less about what it was, really) that honoured the whole “repaying debt thing”, it was the Blade.

(Archangel was a close second, but the Blade made it clear he'd repay his debts ten-fold on multiple occasions. It was horrifying, and Tommy would rather not actually have a debt from the guy).

If he's being honest with himself, Tommy's a little too tired for this right now.

But...

The Blade won't give this up, clearly.

So...

Tommy's eyes land on the large iconic deep obsidian and red laced sword on the Blade's hip and he grins a little.

"I want you to give me sword fighting lessons." he decides.

The Blade's silent for a moment, taking this in.

The wind blows a little and Tommy gets a whiff of something metallic.

Gross.

"Sword fighting lessons?" the man repeats.

"Yep! Just like one or two, I don't give a shit. Anything to get you off my back about this whole creepy n' ominous *blood debt* thing. Sounds sorta like a cult, you know, if you ask me. Don't wanna get involved in that shit, big man, I have standards, you know—"

"Alright, alright," Blade cuts off his rambling, holding up a hand with a sigh. "I'll give you sword lessons."

Holy shit.

That's so poggers.

Wait- no. This guy's literally a convicted supervillain.

But he can also fight.

(Tommy could use some fighting from the Blade *specifically*, if he really thinks about it).

“Great, sounds like a poggers deal,” Tommy grins at him again.

“Poggers? Really?” The Blade repeats, almost sounding like he’s amused.

“Don’t judge my vocabulary,” Tommy snaps, glaring at him now, “Now could you do me a favour and leave so I can actually get more than two hours of sleep?”

The villain regards him for a moment, then exhales a bit.

“...Alright. Bye, Tommy.”

“Bye, *The Blade*.”

The door shuts, and Tommy slinks to the ground.

Holy fucking shit.

He’s in so much trouble.

But...

Sword training pog.

---

“Toms, kid,” Sam ruffles the boy’s hair gently, a frown of concern on his face. “Did you get any sleep last night?”

Tommy looks up from where he’s playing with Fran, who was twirling in circles at his feet in the back room of the café. Sam is watching him with concerned eyes, head tilted slightly.

It’s hard to lie to the guy.

He’s way too nice.

He gives off that tired but somehow functioning parental vibe.

It’s a bit weird.

“I did, I did, I got like, six hours,” Tommy smiles weakly through the lie, before adding, “Don’t get all- all *dad mode* on me.”

Sam grins at him widely, “‘Dad mode’?” he repeats.

Tommy realizes his mistake, immediately beginning to back track, laughing nervously, “No, no, no aha— sorry, uh— *look*, alright, I didn’t mean it— fucking hell, I should get back to work.”

Cursing under his breath and with burning ears, Tommy gets up from the fold-up chair in the break room and exits, Fran hassling at his heels.

He can hear Sam’s warm chuckling as he walks back out into the main room.

Tommy has decided he's gonna pretend that never happened and also, potentially, gaslight Sam until he thinks it was all a dream or something.

It's late out, as per usual. The clock that ticks ominously on the wall behind Tommy reads half past eleven.

There aren't many customers in the café tonight besides Hannah, one of Tommy's regulars, who is animatedly chatting with someone on the other side of the booth from her that Tommy can't quite recognize.

(Tommy has decided that he couldn't give a shit to learn their name, if he's being honest).

Fran sniffs at his feet a little as Tommy makes himself a cup of water. He knows that Sam wouldn't care if he made himself a coffee or something, but Tommy really doesn't *need* caffeine.

(He's never had it before, but he somehow just knows he wouldn't need it).

The door opens, letting in a gust of hot air that makes Tommy cringe, and a familiar face walks in.

Fran barks for a moment, shooting out from beside Tommy to sniff the newcomer, recoiling with a growl at the recognition of what kind of hybrid it is.

Oh, hell.

"Tommy Innit!" Charlie Slimecicle chirps, a big enthusiastic smile plastered on his green translucent face. He glances down at Fran and gasps, waving and cooing at the dog patronizingly.

Fran backs off, slumping down at Tommy's feet again, growling a bit under her breath yet shaking a bit in fear.

It's a little funny, honestly, how terrified she is.

Charlie wouldn't hurt a fly.

His *boss*, however...

"Eyup, Slime," Tommy exhales, leaning against the counter so that he can bend down and scratch behind Fran's ear, "Are you here for pastries or something?"

(He knows that Charlie wouldn't come around *here* if he wanted something sweet).

"Nope! Just checking on Tommy Innit from Nook's Bakery!" Charlie beams at him, before adding, "Oh, and Quackity wanted me to make sure that you were healthy!"

Of course he did.

"Well you can tell him I'm just fine," Tommy grits through his teeth.

The last thing he wants or needs is that guy sniffing around here.

Sure, he provided good medication (and safety when need be), but Quackity was a handful.

He mostly cared about Primes more than anything and it only made Tommy feel worse about his situation.



Walking into Quackity's domain felt like walking into a tyrant king's palace in some ways.

(Plus, the guy could be extremely protective over certain stuff).

"Oh! Okay!" Charlie frowns a bit, thinking, before his eyes light up behind his glasses at something he'd forgotten to say, "He also mentioned that he'd like to come visit you soon, I think!"

Great!

That's literally the last thing that Tommy wants!

Especially now with The Blade training him to sword fight. He didn't know what it was with the two, but Quackity always had this... weird feud with the guy. Tommy never cared too much to ask about it.

"Did he say when?" Tommy asks weakly, rubbing a hand down his face.

Maybe he can convince the villain to reschedule their whole... training session.

(Not that the fucker had given him any intel to when the actual training would be or where, which was strangely irritating. Not everyone has a bendable schedule, dickhead).

"In three weeks or so," Charlie says, walking up closer to the counter so he can peer down at Fran some more.

"Great," Tommy grumbles, standing up straight. Fran growls more now that Tommy isn't rubbing her ear. "Tell him I said thanks for the heads up and the, uh, check in, but I'm absolutely fucking fine. I'm at the epitome of my health, if you will."

“I believe you because I know you wouldn’t lie to me, Tommy Innit,” Charlie smiles at him way too kindly.

“Yeah, yep,” Tommy responds with a grimace.

He’s very uncomfortable.

“Goodbye then, Tommy Innit! See you soon!” Charlie sends him a wave, then glances down behind the back of the counter, “Bye, Fran puppy! Bye bye!”

With a final enthusiastic smile in Tommy’s direction, the hybrid exits the café.

Fran fully calms down now that Charlie isn’t around, leaning against Tommy’s leg with a soft exhale.

Tommy, however, is far from calm.

He might have to clean that fucking sofa after all.

---

“So...” Tubbo exhales, gazing at the sofa with a frown, taking in the strange bloodstain near the right arm rest. “You called Ranboo and I over here to... help you clean your sofa?”

“No, dumbass, I called you two over to help me re-dye my hair,” Tommy seethes, pointing at his own curls. He almost looks defeated at the words as he says them. “You’re the one who said I needed it redyed or something.”

(Not entirely true. He also would like help cleaning the sofa. Not that he needs it, he just doesn't want to do it himself).

Ranboo, who had been lingering awkwardly in the kitchen, watching the scene from afar, steps into the living room.

He's got a bowl and a bottle of hair dye in his hands, head tilted the way it is constantly. Tommy wonders if his neck hurts from doing that before being reminded that his back hurts from constantly walking with what Karl once jokingly called "Mickey Mouse posture".

(If only that were the only reason).

"So, uhm..." Ranboo glances at Tommy, and then at the plush carpet worriedly, "Let's... dye?"

"Do not say any fucking puns under my roof. If you do, I'll have to stab you."

"Please don't do that, actually, I uhm, wouldn't enjoy being stabbed."

"We will see about that," Tommy says ominously.

Ranboo gulps, glancing at Tubbo, who is rather distracted with picking at the paint on his nails. He had just painted them black and yellow.

"Uhm... alright then," Ranboo chuckles nervously, taking a seat on the floor criss-cross style. It's a bit awkward with his lanky legs, but he manages, "Can you come closer so I can actually dye your hair, please?"

"Only if Tubbo lets me watch a movie on his phone," Tommy decides as he sits on the floor, looking expectantly at his friend.

“You have a perfectly good phone, Tommy,” Tubbo hums absentmindedly.

“But it’s all old and cracked! It’s so annoying trying to watch my Tube videos about guns when there’s *cracks* in the way,” Tommy whines. “Can I pleaseeeee use yours?”

“Your videos about *what?*—”

“No.”

Tommy frowns with a pout, glancing at Ranboo, who had still been trying to process what the kid had said.

He even tries putting on the classic puppy dog eyes that (usually) work.

Ranboo stares at him for a few minutes before sighing in utter defeat, fishing into his pocket and tossing his phone in Tommy’s direction.

Success!

“Don’t watch any horror movies, please. It’ll mess with my Netflix algorithm.”

“No promises.”

---

Tommy stares at himself in the mirror, lightly touching the newly dyed red tips in his hair.

Tubbo and Ranboo had just left - despite insisting they stayed for a sleepover - and he had all but bolted for the restroom to check over his newly styled hair.

His hair's growing quite long, he realizes with a bit of a flutter as he gazes at the cracked mirror in front of him.

It's nice having long hair, he thinks.

Bangs that fall into his eyes and hair that curls up right under his ears, just barely long enough for him to pull back onto a ponytail.

There's something so completely different about having long hair compared to when he had been forced to crop it short that makes him feel... free, in a way.

Maybe it's a good day today.

His back doesn't hurt too much, Tubbo can no longer bully him for having pink tips, and he did watch a horror movie on Ranboo's phone despite the man's protests.

Plus, he had successfully cleaned his sofa... even though the cushion was still wet and he'd probably have to sleep on the floor again anyways.

It's a good day, he decides.

Hopefully it'll stay that way.

---

Techno hums as he enters the living room, pulling his boar mask off and placing it on a shelf near the television.

Wilbur, who is sat with his legs taking up the whole sofa, glances up at him, before snickering.

He pulls the earbuds out of his left ear to comment, “Have fun with the kid you’re indebted to?”

“Move your legs,” Techno says simply, poking at Wilbur’s legs with a huff.

“Make me.”

Techno stares at him.

Wilbur relents immediately, moving his legs so that Techno can sit down, leaning his head back against the cushions.

“Phil around?” Techno wonders, hands working through his tangled hair to pull out knots.

“Hmm, I think he’s closing up the bookshop right now,” Wilbur hums simply. “Why?”

“Eh, just need his advice on something.”

“Oooh, advice? I’m good at advice.”

“No offense, Wil, but you are the last person I’d go to for advice.”

Wilbur gasps dramatically, “How dare you?”

“How dare I,” Techno repeats in a monotone, then frowns, “Wait, Phil’s closing up the bookstore? The one that child you’re attached to works at?”

“Don’t say that like I’ve fucking adopted him, *Blade*.”

“You basically have at this point. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you leaving early in the mornings to check in on him.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, moving his legs so they’re sprawled over Techno’s lap, who immediately shoves them off.

“Brother dearest,” he says with a sickly tone, “My legs hurt from patrol tonight, which you left early to go take care of a stupid debt with a dumb child. Can I *please* rest them properly?”

“No.”

“Do you enjoy seeing me suffer?” Wilbur whines, tossing his head back against the sofa armrest again.

“As your older brother, yes. I find it very amusing.”

Wilbur huffs, turning his head a bit.

It’s silent for a little, and Techno relishes the few seconds of pure silence he gets.

“You know, I think you should meet him,” Wilbur says suddenly.

“Who? The kid you’re obsessed with?”

“Yeah, obviously. And quit saying that, I don’t have obsessions, what’s wrong with you?”

“Why would I want to do that?” Techno muses, dodging the last question easily.

“I dunno,” Wilbur responds, and it sounds honest. He shifts uncomfortably on the sofa for a moment, before continuing, “He kinda reminds me of you sometimes, actually.”

“I remind you of an annoying child?”

“I said *sometimes*.”

“Real kind of you, Wil. Can’t believe my own brother is insulting me like this. So terrible.”

“You know what? That’s the last straw,” Wilbur states proudly. “I’ve decided that I am now going to become a problem.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m going to force you to socialize at some point this week whether you like it or not.”

“No.”

“You can’t stop me.”



Techno turns to look at him, eyebrow raised.

“We both know that I could stop you,” he says bluntly, before adding, “And I already *have* to socialize this week, so you can’t make me do anything I already have to, nerd.”

Wilbur raises his eyebrows curiously, “Oh?”

“Yeah. The kid I’m in debt to wants me to give him sword fightin’ lessons.”

Wilbur lets out a bark of a laugh, nearly doubling over, “What? *Seriously?* That’s what the kid picked? Sword fighting?”

“I was a bit shocked as well,” Techno mutters genuinely. “It seemed like a last resort when he picked it, too. That’s what caught me so off guard.”

Usually, people relish getting debts from people like “The Blade”; it’s not unusual for him to catch people trying to somehow play out a way for them to get him to owe them something.

More than once, Techno’s found that *something* to be an assassination request.

He’s never gotten one for *sword training*, much less has he gotten such hesitance for someone to use their debt.

Every time he’s been in someone’s debt, they already seem to know exactly what they want from him in return and when they want it.

Tommy wanted nothing at first, and then he wanted something so *simple* that it kind of felt... weird, almost, to accept it.

Sword fighting came extremely easy to Techno — it wasn't as though he couldn't teach Tommy how to do it, but more so that it felt *too* easy.

(Very unlike the blood he's shed from the others he's served).

Techno huffs a bit, turning away from Wilbur now, who still seems to be laughing a bit at the shock.

Tommy's definitely a special one, he'll give him that.

## Chapter End Notes

techno, upon receiving tommy's end of the debt: i have decided i like this child. i will protect him much like an older brother

tommy, half awake: huh

fun fact i wrote most of this while rewatching ranboo's undertale vod & on melatonin bc insomnia is a bitch. (it's 4 am pls help)

sorry that this is kinda a weird / shit chapter, uh... i don't have much planned out (yet) for this story so i'm kinda just writing crack for now and seeing where that goes :D

(yes, i do have a small layout, but it's not entirely finished lmao so expect mostly crack & stuff from this)

also also!!! holy shit??? ?? thank u sm for the kudos and comments omg,,, i'm genuinely over here like. reeling. ur all so sweet <3 shsjdhjd

n e ways. more crimeboys next chapter maybe. they r my favourite lmao



# if i fall will you catch me? (yes, obviously)

## Chapter Summary

“Holy shit, Tommy,” Wilbur breathes, gazing down at him, eyes wide with worry in a way that Tommy hadn’t seen before. “Are you alright?”

Tommy blinks, and then reality hits him.

He’s being held.

But not by Wilbur.

or, Tommy suffers some more bc angst is my bestie /j anyways, take ur crimeboys, bedrock bros, & karl & tommy duo content & go<3

## Chapter Notes

the silver stepladder! his one true weakness!

---

TWs: character falling/getting minorly hurt, beginnings of an illness(it’s not described in detail though), small fight scene, flashbacks, cursing (?), mentions of eating disorder. pls be careful !! (let me know if i missed any<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It’s been two weeks.

*Two weeks* and this fucking *ass* keeps coming into the bookstore in the mornings, striding in like he owns the place or something.

He's always smirking too, as if he knows that the second Tommy sees him, the kid literally *slumps* over his desk in defeat.

It's *agitating*.

Why can't Wilbur just leave him alone?

It's not like the guy enjoys his presence or anything, either.

(He makes that abundantly clear with all the insults and shit).

Tommy hates this guy.

He decided that quite a while ago, actually.

But...

Even so...

It's been a bit... *nice* for Tommy to have Wilbur following him around the bookstore.

The guy tells him stories about literally anything that comes to his mind, from the long grocery list of reasons he hates anteaters to the annoyances he has at his own job (those are the ones that make Tommy double over laughing), to stuff much more... humble. Things about his brother and his father, about the songs he's writing, about the places he's been and places he plans on going to.

One of the main things Wilbur enjoys going on tangents about is the “many places he wants to go” as soon as he can escape Manberg (he has made it apparent just how much he hates this city. Tommy agrees with him wholeheartedly).

It’s almost comforting in a kind of strange way to have someone talking to him while he’s working. A gentle reminder that he isn’t alone (even though he knows he is).

Even if he does hate the guy, his voice is nice to listen to.

He wonders sometimes (never out loud) what it would be like to hear Wilbur sing.

Despite coming to the bookstore nearly everyday, Wilbur doesn’t really come to the café in the evenings like he routinely does with the bookstore, but when he does happen to visit, it’s a very “out of the blue” experience.

Tommy’s just decided to grit his teeth and deal with it in the mornings.

(It’s not as annoying as he wishes he could admit, obviously).

When the front door to the store jingles around nine am, Tommy peeks out from behind a bookshelf, groaning when he sees the familiar mop of brown curls bouncing through the door.

It’s a little different this time, though.

This time, there’s another person with him — someone that is actually a bit taller than the guy (how that’s even physically *possible*, Tommy could never know).

The new guy has pink hair pulled back into a long ponytail and a pair of rectangular glasses perched on his nose.

Unlike Wilbur, this person's clothing is a bit more... casual.

If you could call it that.

While Wilbur's the fuckin' weirdo with his big poet like sleeved shirts, the new person's are more pirate-esque. The pair look like a strange pirate(?) and bard duo you'd see on someone's D&D board.

Not that a pirate is a kind of character you could have in D&D.

"Tommy!" Wilbur calls enthusiastically, grinning at where he sees Tommy peering around the bookshelf, waving a little so that the small circlet of gold on his wrist flashes in the sunlight peering in through the overheard windows.

"Wilbur," Tommy grumbles, coming out from behind the bookshelf and eyeing the man's friend that is now staring at him as if he were a ghost, "Who's this bitch?"

"This is my brother!" Wilbur beams as he motions to the man, who still is staring right through Tommy. "He's the one that's really into Greek mythology and all that."

"I can recall," Tommy grimaces.

He really doesn't like how tall this guy is, or the fact that he's looking at him like that.

Wilbur nudges his brother, "His name's Techno. He doesn't talk much."

Despite himself, Tommy snorts, “*Techno*? That’s a weird fucking name.”

The man finally moves - shifting uncomfortably, if you could call that moving - and blinks at Tommy. Wilbur, however, chuckles a bit at Tommy’s comment, nudging his brother again with his elbow.

“Hullo,” Techno says, then is silent for a second before continuing, “Do uh, do you have any... book recommendations?”

“I don’t read.”

“Oh.”

This is... incredibly awkward.

“Well, Toms, *I* would like a new book, if you could help me out?” Wilbur smiles a bit nervously, obviously a bit uncomfortable with the tense vibe. If the guy can even *get* uncomfortable.

“Sure,” Tommy motions with his head towards a different array of bookshelves, “Uhm... what is it you’re looking for exactly?”

“A new magazine maybe- or, or, even better, the full picture detailed book of *Hamilton* the musical—”

“Where do you keep your books on war?” Techno interrupts.

What an odd question.



Tommy frowns at him.

“Uh... over in the history section, I guess?” he motions with his hand to another section of bookshelves, “It depends on what kind of war you’re looking for.”

“Which is your favourite?”

Tommy frowns. It was a good question, honestly. While he didn’t read, he did listen to some Audiobooks.

“Uhm... maybe the early ages of the L’Manberg war, or even the War of the Realms? I think those two are pretty interesting,” Tommy shrugs.

Techno nods accordingly. He looks pretty pleased with Tommy’s answers, but more so looks completely focused on just getting out of there as quickly as possible.

Tommy doesn’t blame him.

If he had a brother like Wilbur, he would want to leave as quickly as possible, too.

“Sorry about him,” Wilbur pats Tommy’s shoulder sympathetically, watching Techno quickly walk in the opposite direction, “He hates socializing.”

“No fucking shit,” Tommy turns back to the bookshelves, pulls the silver stepladder down the shelves, “Why did he come with you if he hates talking to people so much?”

Wilbur pauses for a moment.

“He was worried about me,” he admits, and the answer is almost sheepish.

Tommy actually laughs at that.

“Worried? About *you*? You’re like, six foot four and could probably kill a man,” he glances over his shoulder, grimacing suddenly, “That isn’t a compliment, by the way, so don’t take it as one. I could still take you in a fight so don’t- don’t get any *ideas*. ”

Wilbur grins strangely at him all the same.

Weirdo.

“I’m six foot *five*, by the way,” he corrects as Tommy scales the ladder, looking over the magazine titles.

“Sounds like you’re just in denial,” Tommy hums, smiling to himself as he sees the *perfect* magazine title. It’s just a bit out of reach, though.

“What? What do you mean, I’m ‘in denial’?” Wilbur splutters.

Tommy snorts as he leans forwards a little, holding onto the ladder and reaching for the magazine.

“I mean, you’re going through the five stages of grief, big man. The first stage is always denial, and it kinda seems that’s what it’s like when anyone brings up the topic of your height.”

“I’m not- I’m not fucking *grieving*!”

“If you say so,” Tommy hums sweetly, and the magazine is just a little bit in his reach—

“Tommy, be careful—”

His shoe slips, and he grabs the back of the magazine just as his hand that’s holding onto the ladder gives way, and he’s falling again.

He’s plummeting, and the feeling’s *all too familiar*.

...

.

.

He’s been here before, hasn’t he?

\_\_\_\_\_

*Fingertips reach for the edge of a building.*

*Pleas escape from his mouth.*

.

.

.

*But nobody came.*

---

“... Tommy? Kid? Can you hear me?”

There’s someone unfamiliar talking to him.

No... wait.

He knows that voice.

“Holy fuck, Techno- Techno, I thought- fucking hell,” a different voice says, sounding out of breath and extremely worried.

Tommy definitely knows that voice.

“Wil?” Tommy grumbles, opening his eyes blearily.

He doesn’t even remember closing them in the first place.

He can feel something warm pressed against his right ear and a... heartbeat?

How bright it is in the store is another thing Tommy notices.

He can see the bookshelves towering over him, the small dust particles floating through the air against the sunlight shining in through the windows high above his head.

And then he can see a face peering down at him.

“Holy shit, Tommy,” Wilbur breathes, gazing down at him, eyes wide with worry in a way that Tommy hadn’t seen before. “Are you alright?”

Tommy blinks, and then reality hits him.

He’s being *held*.

But not by Wilbur.

He glances upwards more and flinches when he sees Wilbur’s brother looking at him curiously, expression remaining strangely *blank* despite the weird look in his red eyes behind rectangular framed glasses.

(No, not red— they’re brown, but... something about them almost resembles a blood colour that makes Tommy incredibly uncomfortable).

Something glints in the light and Tommy’s eyes catch notice of a small green emerald dangling from one of the man’s ears. He hadn’t noticed it before - it was probably covered by the guy’s pink hair.

...What the hell?

Tommy wriggles in the man’s arms, immediately being placed down on his feet.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you? Why- why were you *holding* me?” He accuses the man automatically, voice wavering, pointing at him. His back hurts again. Quite bad, actually. *For fuck’s sake.*

It was just starting to feel a bit better, too.

Techno raises an eyebrow, almost mockingly, “*You’re* the one who fell off the ladder, kid. I caught you.”

Oh.

“Okay, well, I would’ve been fine even if you *hadn’t* caught me,” Tommy glares at him, and the man scoffs a bit. “I’m TommyInnit, the truly incredible- uhm, fantastic and extremely *elusive* man that never dies or gets hurt.”

Nobody says anything for a second and Tommy gulps a bit, rubbing his neck anxiously, fingers dragging across the marking hidden beneath his collared shirt and sweater.

“How did you even get over here so quickly?” Tommy mutters.

“I ran,” Techno says simply. So blasé, as if the dude wasn’t halfway across the bookstore.

... Then again, Eldritch Wings isn’t exactly big in *width*, but rather in height. The place was probably four stories tall and the shape of a cylinder. Tommy always thought it was funny looking, much like a penis.

His eyes flick over to Wilbur, who is staring at him intensely, seemingly amused with Techno’s actions but too distracted with watching Tommy to question them.

“Tommy, are you sure you’re okay?” Wilbur asks suddenly, tone rather stressed, and he genuinely looks concerned. “It’s... I haven’t... did you pass out or something?”

That doesn't make Tommy feel appreciated. Not at all.

"No, Wil, I'm dying," Tommy deadpans. Wilbur's eyes widen for a second until Tommy quickly adds, "I'm joking, holy shit. I'm *fine*, man. I don't think I passed out, just slipped. I'm accident prone, as my good pal Tubbo frequently reminds me."

He takes a breath then adds, with a frown, "Quit bein' such a fuckin' mother hen."

Wilbur wilts a little, but seems relieved all the same.

"Well... if you're sure."

Tommy rolls his eyes, then glances down at his hands with a frown, remembering the reason he'd fallen in the first place, "Wait, where's the magazine I got you?"

"You mean this one?" Techno holds the magazine up, frowning at it a bit, and then snorts when he reads the cover, "*The Look into an Anteater's Life*, huh? It's a NatGeo Wild magazine, too. Wilbur, this must be yours."

Wilbur's face falls and his head snaps in Tommy's direction, eyes narrowing.

"You- fucking-" the man stalks over and ruffles Tommy's hair angrily, as if he's trying to mess with it, and the boy squawks, shoving him off.

"Don't mess with my hair, you dick! I just got it redone!"

"I noticed, it looks nice now that it isn't so *pink*—"

“Is that an indirect insult?” Techno frowns.

“Yep!” Wilbur grins, popping the ‘p’, before reaching out towards the magazine in his brother’s hands, “Now give me my magazine, you bitch.”

Techno holds the magazine out of reach, smirking a bit as he turns to Tommy,

“Tommy, you are my new favourite person because of this.” Techno decides, motioning with his head towards the magazine. Tommy raises his eyebrows.

“Really?” he asks, then blinks a bit, clearing his throat, “I mean— that doesn’t come as a shock to me. I’m *everyone’s* favourite person. It just comes with knowing me, of course.”

Techno’s nose shrivels and he tosses the magazine at his brother, nearly hitting Wilbur in the face, “Nevermind. I revoke what I said.”

“No, no no no, you can’t take it back now,” Tommy grins at him sharply.

“Too bad, I’m taking it back.”

---

Tommy sits down beside Karl in the break room, sighing and putting his forehead down onto the table. It had been a couple hours since he had fallen off the ladder and his back *really* hurt.

His ankle hurts, too.



That was probably a given, though, considering he spent most of the night before trying not to break up a fight he'd seen in the alleyway.

The amount of violence in his part of the district was honestly overwhelming at this point.

Maybe he should make that "hobby" of his less of a hobby and more of a... second job.

He'd hate to be back in the limelight, though.

Phil enters the break room and Tommy immediately straightens his back upon seeing him, raising an eyebrow.

The man's blonde hair is pulled back into a simple, green ribboned ponytail. He looks purely content with everything, a small smile on his face when he glances at something Karl's watching on his phone, before turning to Tommy. There's a med kit in his right hand.

"Hey, mate," he says kindly and Tommy startles at being addressed by his boss, who is literally never around. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine, I guess," Tommy shrugs.

Phil frowns.

"Are you sure? I'd hate for you to get hurt while working on the job," he says, taking a seat beside Tommy and clasping his hands together calmly, placing the medkit on the ground beside his chair.

Oh. So *that's* why he's worried.

Tommy should've expected that kinda thing at this point.

"I'm not gonna *sue* you if that's what you're wondering about, Mr. Phil," Tommy mutters, leaning back in his chair and averting his eyes to the ground, "I don't have the money for a lawyer and uh, I'm actually not hurt at all, so there's no need for that med kit you brought in."

Phil snorts.

It's so random and the complete opposite of the reaction Tommy had been expecting that the boy looks up immediately, eyebrows raised.

"Did you call me *Mr. Phil*?" he asks, eyes crinkling in the corners when he smiles, head tilted. Tommy can see a tiny emerald dangling from his right ear. It looks... vaguely familiar.

But that's not exactly what he should be focusing on right now.

"Yes? That's your name?" he frowns.

"Yeah, I know, but—" Phil chuckles, putting his hand over his mouth, his eyes giving away his gleeful smile, "Nobody really calls me Mr. Phil. It's usually just... Phil or Craft or something."

"Your last name is *Craft*?" Tommy repeats, vaguely bewildered.

Karl giggles from across the table about something, but when Tommy glances at him, the man's completely invested in his phone.

Huh.

Phil chuckles some more, “Yes, Tommy, my surname is Craft. You make me feel so old when you call me ‘Mr. Phil’, mate.”

The man sighs, adding whilst rubbing between his eyes, “I’m glad my sons aren’t around, they’d never let me live this down.”

Now this is news.

Probably even bigger news than Phil not wanting to be addressed formally.

“You have *children?*” Tommy gawks.

It’s hard to picture this guy having *kids*.

He’s definitely got that fatherly vibe and all (similar to Sam), but he’s also the one of the scariest normal dudes Tommy knows. It’s gotta be the carefree smile. Or maybe it’s that one time he saw the guy beat some random person’s ass into the *ground* for making fun of Karl.

Either way, the guy is kinda lowkey terrifying.

Not that Tommy’s scared of him. He isn’t scared of anything.

To his surprise, Phil laughs again. The guy laughs a lot.

“Yeah, I know, strange, isn’t it?” Phil sighs a bit, leaning his chin on his hand and looking at Tommy carefully, something strange that Tommy can’t name reflected in his eyes. “They aren’t actually my children, before you ask. Not biologically, at least. I adopted my eldest when he was only a couple years of age, and then was gifted my second child from the gods.”

As if that makes any sense, Tommy wants to say, frowning. He probably shouldn't ask anymore questions.

"Why would a god *gift* you a child?" he blurts out, then mentally kicking himself afterwards for asking such a question. He back tracks, "Oh, uh, sorry, Mr. Phil, I didn't mean to offend you or anything—"

"No, no, you didn't offend, don't worry," Phil smiles at him, and it's genuine. "It's a good question, really. I'm not exactly sure why She gifted me a child, but I am forever grateful."

Tommy narrows his eyes. Phil doesn't seem to give any inference that he's going to give anymore information on the topic, so he changes it.

"I really don't need that medkit, Mr.- uh- *Phil*, so don't bother worrying about that or anything," Tommy says, eyeing the kit on the ground again, then looking up at Phil, who just sighs. He looks fond, for some reason.

"If you say so, Tommy," he hums, picking up the medkit and standing from the chair, dusting off the bottom of his workshirt, "Don't be afraid to ask if you need anything, though, okay? I know I'm not around much, but I won't bite or get angry at you if you knock on my office door."

Tommy nods even as he mentally notes not to do that.

"Thanks, Phil."

Phil smiles at him again kindly, giving him and Karl a nod before exiting the room, taking the med kit with him.

Tommy relaxes into his chair as soon as the man's gone. Maybe he should take a quick nap before he has to leave for Nook's.

Karl giggles from the other side of the table again. Tommy moves his head up at it, frowning at where Karl's snickering behind his hand, staring at his phone.

He's been doing that this entire time.

"What are you gigglechamping about over there, Karl Jacobs?" Tommy muses, eyeing the man. Then he adds jokingly, "It's very- it's very *baby* of you."

Karl's laughs only enunciate with Tommy's choice of words.

"Just looking at this video circulating about one of the top ranking heroes," Karl responds between giggles, putting his phone on the table and moving it forwards in Tommy's direction.

Tommy frowns, picking up the phone and clenching his jaw.

The video's of Hypnos, the third top ranked hero, collapsing in the middle of a battle (is that the Archangel he's fighting...? *No*— focus on the heroes). The action is completely uncoordinated, and unexpected, as if it wasn't something the hero had planned.

(Tommy can see how it's entertaining to those who don't know about the guy's *special enhancement*).

Grimacing, Tommy goes to hand the phone back to Karl, when a familiar flick of green appears on the screen, an arm wrapping around Hypnos and a familiar shouting come from Arsonist.

The Dee Team, otherwise known as three of the best heroes that Manberg has ever had the luck of inhabiting behind its cracked walls that reach the clouds.

He should've expected that they would be all together in this video.

Tommy can feel his muscles tense up at the sights and sounds of yelling and (was that an explosion?), Arsonist shouting in Morpheus' direction as he helps the man pick up Hypnos from the ground, whose head lolls off to the side.

Tommy can see Archangel floating off of the ground a little with his massive black wings, preparing to strike — and Tommy turns his head away.

“Hilarious,” he mutters distractedly to Karl, pushing the phone back in the man's direction and getting up, “I'm gonna head off now. Be seeing you, big man.”

Karl watches him carefully, then shoots him a strange smile, but there's something soft in his eyes, “Okie-doke. Bye bye, Tommy. Be careful out there, alright?”

His numerous watches and bangles make a ringing and clanging noise when he waves enthusiastically. Tommy normally would take a minute to look at the lights glinting off of the multiple coloured amounts of jewelry Karl wears but today he just leaves.

“I'm always careful.”

---

Sam isn't a father.

At least, not biologically.

He's always wanted a child, though, someone to care for and to raise alongside him, to teach his skills in baking to and watch grow up.

It had been a dream of his ever since he had seen all the children in Manberg (albeit there weren't as many as there used to be) playing with their fathers on the playgrounds or coming into his bakery and asking for sweets.

Instead of getting a child, though, Sam adopted a puppy he'd seen in the window of a pet store down the street - ran by some demon hybrid named Bad, whom he had meant a couple times before and found extremely entertaining.

He had gotten Fran just in time, too. The pet store went out of business only a couple weeks afterwards and there became yet another empty store on the streets of Manberg.

When Tommy first stumbled into his bakery, form sagged and sweater much too big, eye bags too prominent, Sam wasn't sure what to do.

He had never really taken care of a child besides the ones he'd babysat before as a kid himself.

When he hired Tommy, he knew the kid was lying when he said he was eighteen years old. It was obvious with the baby fat still in his cheeks, the braces on his teeth that looked as though they'd gone a long time since being tightened.

But it didn't matter to Sam — the kid was clearly on his own and carrying a lot of baggage on his shoulders, secrets weighing him down so that he walked with a strange posture. He even *looked* small, even though Sam knew he was pretty tall for his age (whatever that age may be).

He never asked Tommy about it much. The kid was brash and easily irritated. He was the type to keep secrets to himself and not want any sort of sympathy, even though every ruffle of his hair or pat on the shoulder made Tommy practically melt.

It was concerning, the amount of times Tommy would come into work with fresh new bruises on his cheeks or his nose, or with the same outfit he had worn the day before. It was plainly obvious that Tommy didn't have much money, nor did he have much help in the way of it.

Sam promised himself the day that he saw Tommy stagger into the bakery, looking as though he'd seen a ghost and with a new fresh wound hidden underneath his curls, that he would do anything for him.

He'd protect him.

Whatever the cost.

## Chapter End Notes

tommy: \*notices emerald earring twice\*

also tommy: \*does not put two and two together, even after phil admits to having two sons\*

ALSO bro. what do. what do we call karl & tommy's duo? is there a subtw for that? i kinda just want to call them the "gigglechamp duo". idk why lmao. it j kinda fits.

anyways

we as a society do not talk abt that cover wilbur soot does of "baby it's cold outside" with toxxxicsupport. it's so good. go listen rn !!!1111

hope ur well! sorry if the next update isn't out for a hot minute, i'm not feeling too pogchamp!!

i might be coming down with an illness sadge. also it's 1 am crab rave

(you can tell ive been watching too many undertale play throughs from this chapter... sweats)



(i got the idea for tommy calling phil 'mr. phil' from the fic 'no cause for concern' by hedgehoggeryyy :) pls go read it, it's so good)

# tommy proves that he has terrible luck once again

## Chapter Summary

As per usual, Tommy... isn't feeling too poggers.

(Not that he would ever admit that, of course.)

He woke up to his stomach hurting like he had just been punched, his head throbbing, and a stopped up nose.

Great!

or, tommy gets sick & decides to ignore it as per usual. quackity shows up at the wrong time, wilbur & techno learn something new, & overall tommy is just. not having a great time.. again.

## Chapter Notes

uhm.

this chapter's a bit of a mess cuz i'm currently not doing pogchampion! but hey. i wrote ??? angst ??? yeah. that.

oh promises for minor fluff in the next chapter (: (maybe)

---

TWs: mentions of eating disorders (pls be careful!!), character implied getting sick (nothing mentioned in too gruesome of detail), minor talk of blood/death. please lmk if there's any i should add, ty<3

Techno sits stiffly down in the living room, staring at the carpet, putting his hands together as he tries to collect his thoughts about *what the hell just happened*.

Wilbur stretches as he walks into the room after Techno, yawning greatly - the two had spent quite a while at the bookstore chatting with Tommy and seeing the kid just *fall* off of that ladder had sent them both into hyperdrive.

Techno's twin slumps down onto the sofa beside him, leaning his head back against the arm rest and closing his eyes.

Techno, however, remains sitting stiffly.

The... the kid that he'd seen. *Wilbur's* kid, apparently... was the *same fucking one* as he had taken a literal blood debt (more like *oath*) from as a supervillain. The same one who had stitched him up that night even though (technically) he would've been fine without it.

The same kid who admitted that he *watches* him fight, just for the hell of it. The one who literally said that he "did not give a shit" about heroes nor villains, that he just wanted to live his life or something.

Techno was... beyond bewildered.

"Hey man, y'alright?" Wilbur mutters, sounding groggy already, lifting his head up and pushing his curls out of his eyes to frown at his twin, who is staring intently at the carpeted flooring as though he might kill it.

"That was Tommy?" Techno asks, as if trying to decide if what he'd just gone through was reality or not. Then he emphasizes, "*Your* Tommy?"

Wilbur blinks a bit, frown deepening at his words.

“Yeah? Obviously? Tech, man, are you feeling okay?” then he sighs, leaning his head back again, “If you haven’t had any water yet today, I’m going to have to kick your ass.”

Normally, Techno would’ve snorted at the thought of Wilbur thinking he could kick his ass, but...

That kid...

The one that had looked so *tiny* in the bookstore, so afraid and yet brash, with golden curls that so heavily resembled his own father’s...

Was that *really* the same one whom he’d gotten a rather hesitant blood debt from?

The one who wanted him to teach him how to sword fight for no apparent reason? Just for the hell of it?

(Techno worried about the underlying reasons that there could be for Tommy wanting to learn how to sword fight, then pushed it away. There was no reason for him to worry. There was a *ton* of Tommys out there... right? A ton of them that had the blonde curls like gold, a ton with the same splay of freckles, a ton with the same blue eyes).

(...Right?)

Realization hits him like a ton of bricks, and he turns his head in Wilbur’s direction, who is softly humming to himself. Carelessly.

“Hey, Wil?”

“Yeah?”

“You know that kid I told you about?”

Wilbur snorts, “The one who was so hesitant upon receiving a debt from *the Blood God* himself?”

“Yep, that’s the one.”

“Obviously. Why?”

Techno hums, feeling suddenly nervous.

“That, uh. That was Tommy.”

There’s a moment of silence.

...

“*What????*”

---

The alleyway is cold.

Tommy wraps himself up tighter in one of the sweaters he’s worn nearly everyday. It’s a crimson thing, a little lighter than the tips of his hair. Despite his height, it hangs loosely around him.

To make matters worse, it's *raining*.

It had started to sprinkle before he even left the café, before turning into a full downpour by the time he'd finally gotten Sam to *stop checking on me, man, I'm fine, it's just a scratch, chill out*.

He's walked home in a rainstorm before.

He should be fine, really.

This is nothing.

---

It was, actually, something.

When Tommy gets home, he all but collapses onto the sofa, wrapped in the wet sweater and shivering, trying to take in as much warmth that the sofa can possess (which isn't, unfortunately, much).

He doesn't really have much energy left, honestly, but with what little he can muster, he pulls off the sticky wet sweater and tosses it across the room with a huff, sniffing a bit.

Stuffing his face into the cushion of the sofa (and trying to blatantly ignore the lingering scent of lemon and citrus from when Tubbo and Ranboo had helped him clean it), Tommy drifts off to sleep.

---

As per usual, Tommy... isn't feeling too poggers.

(Not that he would ever *admit* that, of course.)

He woke up to his stomach hurting like he had just been punched, his head throbbing, and a stopped up nose.

(It felt like January 23rd all over again).

The medication that Sam had given him the day before for his head wound had worn off by now (after he had told the guy that he'd be taking a couple days off of work to "rest", when in reality it was to prepare himself for his visitor).

Sam had gotten really worried after seeing the scratch underneath his curls, fussing over it with a wet washcloth and putting a small green coloured (like his hair, Tommy had realized) plaster over it, before patting Tommy's shoulder with a gentle smile.

It was nice, being fussed over. Even if Tommy was a big man that could definitely take care of himself... he wasn't exactly complaining about being cared for.

(If you could call what Sam had done... *caring*? Tommy didn't know, really. Nobody had ever cared for him like that... well. Someone had, and he knew that they loved him once, but not anymore. It hurt his head to think about so he tossed it away).

Tommy decides to take his mind off of the throbbing in his head to pace anxiously around his flat, a hand coursing through his hair and another rubbing the back of his neck.

He's layered himself in as much clothing as possible — two sweaters and a pair of pants much too big for him that he has to roll up over his battered red trainers. It's really hot in his

flat without any air conditioning, but he's decided he would rather suffer than have any more questions directed his way from fucking Quackity.

(He didn't feel hot, anyways. If he was being honest, he felt *cold*).

Not that he had a problem with the guy — it's more the opposite. He *wants* to have a problem with him. It's a bit hard to, though, with just how much of a lovable person he is (well, not exactly loveable — the word 'love' is pretty much foreign on Tommy's tongue).

Tommy checks his phone; he'd gotten the heads up text from Charlie at like six this morning, reminding him that it had been three weeks since his rather eventful visit to Nook's.

(It was another thing Tommy had documented mentally to ask Quackity about - how the fuck he knew what jobs Tommy had. It was stalkerish and honestly? Kinda weirdchamp of him).

Sighing, Tommy decides that he probably needs to calm down and perches atop the kitchen counter, scrolling through his phone's home screen so that he can be moving somehow without actually walking around.

His ankle still feels a bit off since falling off that ladder several hours ago. As if to make things worse, he had gone outside for once in his life just a couple days before now (not just to go to work, shockingly) and had nearly gotten into the middle of a fucking *battle* between two people he didn't recognize.

Manberg was so *overwhelming*.

Out of all the places he had to be, why here? There was barely anywhere to hide away at, which was annoying as it was, and it seemed to be quite... overcrowded in terms of the fucking superheroes and supervillains crowd or whatever.

Tommy's just glad that he only has to deal with *one* of those bastards for a couple days or so until the blood debt is gone.



Speaking of said blood debt... he hadn't actually seen the Blade in a while.

Ever since he'd asked the Blade for the sword fighting lessons, the guy has practically gone MIA. Not that this was a bad thing, just kinda awkward when he thinks back to how sure he had been that the Blade was one of the few villains that was adamant about holding up his side of debts.

Oh, well. He didn't really give a shit about sword fighting that much anyways (especially if it included training with one of the supervillains that were a part of the underground Syndicate. That was some cult shit he didn't want to touch with a two meter stick, much less get involved with).

Tommy just sighs, shutting his phone off and rubbing a hand down his face, sniffing a bit. He couldn't afford getting a head cold right now. Not with what was coming for him later that evening.

(He had so many things he needed to take care of and worry about, but *today*...)

At least all he has to worry about for *today* and the next is Quackity's random and worried-induced inspection of his life in addition to the strange little "meetings" the two have every so often, accompanied by Charlie.

(Maybe he should include his current health situation in his current short list of things to worry about — aka *hopefully not passing out right in front of Quackity*).

Yep. He should be just fine.

So long as he doesn't sneeze.

And then there's a loud crashing noise and Tommy just about falls off of his countertop.

His luck really does suck ass.

---

Phil sits in his office, leaning back in his chair with his feet up on the desk, scrolling through his phone.

It's a nice day.

The door bursts open, both Techno and Wilbur walking in at once.

Nevermind.

“Phil, *Phil*,” Wilbur seethes, walking up to Phil’s desk and slamming his hands down on it. The man always has a flair for the dramatic. “Where is Tommy? Is he okay? Why hasn’t he come into work today? Is he sick?”

Phil blinks.

Oh hell. What did he do now?

“Why are you asking...?” he begins wearily.

Wilbur motions accusingly at Techno, looking like he might just pass out, “This fucker right here just laid on me the information that the child he took a fucking *blood debt* from is the same Tommy that I’ve been visiting!”

Oh. Well, that explains a lot.

“Really?” Phil muses, looking in Techno’s direction, who just nods, looking vaguely guilty of some heinous crime.

(Honestly, the guy’s a *supervillain*. If there’s anything he should feel guilty about, this isn’t it).

“Wilbur,” Phil reaches his hands out, eyebrows raised, intent on now trying to soothe his youngest son, “*Chill out*, mate. Tommy called me earlier to let me know he’d be taking today and tomorrow off. He didn’t give me any reasoning and I didn’t ask. He’s allowed to have two days off in the five months that he’s worked here.”

(Hell, Tommy’s granted a week off as holiday, he’s just never decided to take it).

“He’s worked here for *five months*?” Wilbur hisses, looking extremely perplexed.

“He hasn’t taken a day off for five months?” Techno wonders, tone teetering between impressed and concerned.

Oh, boy.

Phil’s dug himself quite a hole here.

Ever since Tommy had fallen off the ladder earlier that morning (or? passed out? it has never really been confirmed what had happened), it had become utterly apparent how much more protective Wilbur had become of the kid.

And now that Techno had realized this was the same child that had taken up a blood debt with him... all hell was gonna break loose. Phil could feel it. He could see it, actually, in both of his son’s eyes.

(It would, admittedly, be kinda funny to see how distressed Tommy would get when both the twins would come daily from here forth to bother him. Although, even he couldn't hide the underlying excitement he had that he could actually talk to someone; now being able to talk to *two* people? Phil felt a bit fond at the thought of Tommy getting that excited).

“That’s- no, I mean, he only works a half shift in the mornings and then has weekends off, so he *does* get days off,” Phil backpedals, holding his hands up at the accusing looks from both of his sons, “What I was trying to imply is that he’s never asked for two days out of the work week off or anything. I think Karl’s even mentioned to me he came in with a head cold once.”

Wilbur frowns a bit at this news, even as his shoulders relax a bit. Techno, however, still seems a little between views.

“Well, maybe I should check on him,” Wilbur hums, glancing at Techno expectantly, who just raises an eyebrow. “If he’s not feeling well, I could bring him some soup...? He doesn’t eat enough, that much is apparent...”

Techno sighs, scratching the back of his neck a bit.

“I’ll check on him later tonight,” Techno states, giving Wilbur a look, the man’s face drooping a little that *he* won’t be the one that gets to do it, “I *do* have a blood debt to fulfill, after all.”

---

Tommy scrambles off the ground, wincing a bit at the ache in his body (it had been a while since he’d eaten anything - usually his food came from Sam, who practically forced it into him whenever he got to Nook’s, but since he was taking two days off, that meant a shortage in eating. Not that he wasn’t used to it).

He quickly maneuvers around the kitchen, frowning at the back window right beside his sofa and the glass that has now accumulated right under the feet of a rather recognizable villain.

“What the fuck?!” Tommy seethes, rushing over to stand in front of the villain and glance between the guy who’s plucking glass off of his suit and the now broken window, “What— *what the fuck’s wrong with you?* You— can’t you just take the front door like a normal fucking person?”

Tommy motions wildly with his arms at the front door, and the Blade shrugs.

Tommy sniffles a bit, rubbing his nose with the sweater he’d pulled off the floor from earlier (the wet one from the night before remains crumbled up against the corner wall).

“There were people standing there already and I didn’t want them to get suspicious,” he says nonchalantly, then glances around the apartment, as if seeing it for the first time.

(Then again, he had seen it last time when it was pitch black with only the light on in the kitchen to serve as some sort of light source).

“Fucking— okay. Okay. *Fine,*” Tommy runs his hands down his face, trying to keep his cool despite the fact that he quite literally doesn’t have the money to fix the window (and that he can feel a sneeze coming on), “Look, alright, I don’t know what it is with you and coming at the stupidest times possible, but can’t you at least get a decent schedule? It’s like, six pm, bitch. Last time you came at *four in the morning*. Where’s the consistency?”

“You... do you *want* me to come at four in the morning?” The Blade asks, sounding vaguely confused,

“No, just— holy shit, you’re so weird,” Tommy runs his hands anxiously through his hair, and then freezes when he hears a knock at the front door.

Fuck.

Quackity's here at the *wrong fucking time*.

As per usual, Tommy's luck is just in the gutter at this point.

To make matters worse, Tommy sneezes.

Then on top of that, there's a loud *shing!* sound and Tommy realizes with a start (and a poorly disguised flinch) that the Blade has literally unsheathed his sword.

(His super awesome, super shiny, but also *super deadly* sword made of obsidian. Tommy almost stops to admire the thing because it's right there, right in front of him, but he forces himself back to reality).

"Woah, woah, woah," Tommy holds his hands up, laughing nervously and backing a step away from the villain, "No need to get out your sword, big man. Chill out."

"Chilling out" is probably what Tommy should be doing.

He is far from it, as per usual.

"Look, uh— you've gotta leave, alright? You've gotta get the fuck out and come back in like — I don't know, a week or something—" Tommy begins to push against The Blade's armour chest plate, unsuccessfully trying to maneuver the man back out the window. He sniffles a bit, taking his hand away to brush up against the bottom of his nose again, "*Move, bitch!*"

"Tommy," the Blade puts his hand on Tommy's shoulder, bending down so that Tommy's basically peering into the empty eye sockets of the boar skull atop his head. His tone takes on something almost... scary. Like he's ready to tear someone apart. That's kinda awkward.

"Are you in danger?"

Tommy glares at him, pushing his hands against the man's armour with more force to try and mask the way they shake, "No, I'm not in fuckin' danger, I'm just- I'm just *busy* right now, alright? Now get the fuck out!"

The Blade doesn't seem to really believe him but relents, letting go of Tommy's shoulders as there's another knock at the door.

The villain pauses to stare at the door, looking all menacing as the sun sets behind him out the broken window, his shadow large against the carpeted flooring.

Fucking hell.

"Ignore it," Tommy hisses at the man, pushing him towards the window again, going as far as to kneel down and use his back legs to push the villain (even though it doesn't do much and he's slowly feeling more and more lightheaded. He probably should've eaten something), "And when you come back, you're helping me fix that fucking window."

"Am I now?" The Blade says, sounding vaguely amused.

"Yes, you are, because you fucking broke it," Tommy responds, letting go of the Blade as the man begins to maneuver out of the window.

The former's breaths coming out heavy now as he leans heavily against the wall beside the window, glaring down the villain, "Now leave before I" - Tommy pauses to sneeze, then continues - "before I *clart* you."

The Blade huffs, sounding vaguely amused again, "Alright, kid, I'm goin', I'm goin'."

There's another knock at the door and Tommy's heart rate speeds up a tad. This guy really needs to get the fuck out faster.

“Get— *hurry the fuck up!*” Tommy hisses, and with a final push, The Blade is out of the window, dropping down onto the iron fire exit with a *clang*.

He glances up at Tommy, who flips him off. Even though he can’t see it, Tommy’s almost certain the man snorted at his action before disappearing off into the alleyway.

With a final glance to make sure the guy’s gone, Tommy rushes off in the direction of his front door, pulling it open just as Charlie is raising his hand in the air to knock again.

Frozen in place, Charlie beams, “Tommy Innit!”

Tommy, however, glares in the direction of the person standing next to Charlie. The man beside the hybrid wears a three piece expensive suit with little poker pieces for buttons, black hair stashed underneath a beanie that’s probably glued to his head.

Paired with the rest of the get-up is a giant grin that shows off his gold tooth.

“Tommyyyy!” Quackity begins, holding his bejeweled hands out, as if going in for a hug, “How’s my *favourite* customer doing?”

Tommy’s eyes narrow further and he grits out, “I’m fine.”

(He holds back another sneeze).

“Are you sure? Slime mentioned that you looked like you were in pain when he visited Nook’s,” Quackity hums, frowning a bit as he glances at Tommy’s sleeve. He looks strangely concerned, then shrugs, “You know, it’s alright to be hurting. It’s no biggie. I’ve got medication that you can have.”

“Big Q, I genuinely don’t think I can get any more of that shit from you,” Tommy grimaces, leaning against the front doorframe so Quackity can’t try to push past him into the flat. It



would be incredibly awkward to explain the glass on the floor. “I’ve got no money as it is.”

“I know,” Quackity’s face softens a bit. “I just want to make sure you’re okay, kid.”

Tommy tilts his head so it also leans against the doorframe. He’s starting to feel a bit dizzier than he was before. Quackity needs to *leave*.

“I’m fine, asshole,” Tommy mutters, wrapping his sweater around himself a bit more to hide the way his arms shake. “Can you leave now? I’ve got some cleaning up to do and really don’t need you sniffing around my flat.”

Quackity watches him for a second, looking incredibly hesitant, but he sighs. He knows how futile it is to argue with Tommy: the kid’s the only person he can’t seem to win an argument with.

(Despite winning arguments literally being one of his enhancements, Tommy somehow is always resistant. The kid has a strange amount of determination. It’s incredibly annoying in some ways, but also... comforting).

“You need to take care of yourself more, Tomy,” Quackity says, crossing his arms, the jewels on his fingers glinting a bit in the few sun streaks peeking out from behind Tommy as the sun sets, “If you say you’re okay, I won’t bother you. But I still need to discuss something of... importance with you.”

Tommy raises an eyebrow.

“What’s so important that you came here all the way from the other side of Manberg?”

Quackity’s eyes glitter dangerously, and his smile only widens. He looks... terrifying despite being shorter than Tommy.

“You’ll see,” the man says ominously, reaching out to pat Tommy’s shoulder gently. The boy resists a flinch, and Quackity’s eyes soften a fraction. “When’s a good time for me to come back and collect you, so that we can discuss?”

“Collect me?” Tommy repeats, fingers digging into his own arms, crossed protectively over his chest, “What do you mean? I thought you were just gonna visit again. Like you normally do— which, by the way, kinda fuckin’ weirdchamp that you do that, pal.”

“What good’s a visit if I can’t take you to the place I’m so excited about?” Quackity hums, smiling a little. He blatantly ignores Tommy’s last comment, but that isn’t what makes this whole situation a bit... strange.

Next to Quackity, Charlie, who is normally an extremely chatty hybrid, has been strangely quiet this whole time. Out of everything, *that’s* what is making Tommy uncomfortable.

(To be fair, the guy’s usually a good “comedy relief” type to have around Quackity — cracking strange puns about random things Big Q will say, earning chuckles from Tommy and eye rolls from his boss).

But today he’s *silent*.

Tommy clenches his jaw.

“Alright, Q,” he mumbles, relieved that the man’s finally leaving without much of an argument (even if that in itself is a red flag), “Uhm...”

Tommy scratches the back of his neck, shifting on his feet, eyes flitting back and forth between hybrid and human (?).

“You can... collect me this weekend, I guess? I... have to get back to work tomorrow anyways, so... it’d be great if you get me when I have time off or something.”

Quackity nods, humming.

“I understand, I understand,” he sounds a little forlorn, however, about the event being rescheduled. It is a bit obnoxious traveling halfway across Manberg for nothing.

(Tommy wonders why the guy hadn’t just called him on his cell - before remembering that Quackity preferred setting up his meetings in person, whether that included sending his slime hybrid or himself).

(Quackity was eccentric, but Tommy had to give the guy credit. He had been one of the few to save him from dying, after all).

After exchanging goodbyes and shutting the door, Tommy rounds back into his flat and stumbles over to the kitchen counter, grabbing onto it with a white-knuckled grip.

He feels... incredibly nauseated.

His head hasn’t stopped throbbing and he can feel another sneeze coming on that he doesn’t even try to mask.

.....

A quick nap wouldn’t hurt, right?

He’s out before he can even think twice.

---

“So, brother dearest,” Wilbur claps his hands together, coming down the hallway with an excited glimmer in his eye. He had shown up the second Techno had walked inside the penthouse without even a second thought. “How was the little gremlin child doing? Is he feeling well? Do I need to come over there and make sure he’s—”

Wilbur pauses at the weird look on Techno’s face once the man removes his skull mask and crown.

“What’s that look for?”

Techno’s quiet for a second, then hums, “I think Tommy’s sick.”

Wilbur blinks, and then— “Well why the hell didn’t you call me, you idiot?! I would’ve been over there in like five minutes with some soup or something- I don’t actually even know where Tommy *lives*, now that I’m thinking about it—”

“Wil,” Techno interrupts, tone taking on something serious so that Wilbur actually pauses.

Then, Techno has one of those moments where he *debates* with his own head. (Or the voices in it, if you will).

On one hand, he wants to tell Wilbur about the unexpected visitor Tommy had, but on the other hand, that would only invoke a worse (and more protective) action from the guy who’s practically already adopted Tommy as his younger brother.

Techno distantly remembers something Wilbur had said to him during a fight a couple months ago, when he’d been near death and Wilbur had done everything in his last bit of energy to save him: “*I’d bleed myself dry for family.*”

While Techno would make fun of him for his theatre kid-esque lingo now, at the time it had been a bit endearing (and slightly terrifying because that was probably gonna come true if Phil had not come along and invoked death upon their enemies).

So, with an exhale, Techno glances at the kitchen, where undoubtedly Phil is making dinner.

“We should talk to Phil about this before anything,” he mutters, and Wilbur’s eyebrows furrow a bit. He looks like he wants to disagree, but he doesn’t get the chance to when Phil peeks his head around the wall.

“Did you say my name, mate?” he asks, smiling in Techno’s direction. He’s holding a bowl of something. “Good to see you’re back, Techno, how was training with Tommy?”

“That’s what I was gonna ask you about,” Techno hums, glancing warningly at Wilbur, who had opened his mouth to interject. “Uhm... when I went there the kid... didn’t look to great. He was pale and sneezing and stuff.”

Phil raises an eyebrow, then glances at Wilbur, before sighing, as though he already knows where this is going.

“Before you just burst into his house, Wil,” he narrows his eyes sternly in the man’s direction who appears to sink in on himself in a pout, “I think you should give him a call, if you have his number. See if he’d want to hang out or something. If you just randomly showed up on his doorstep, he’d probably get suspicious.”

Then Phil adds, “Plus, you’d just scare the poor thing off.”

Techno looks at Wilbur expectantly, who just sighs.

“Alright, alright,” the man pulls his phone out, scrolling through his contacts, then adding when seeing Techno’s frown, “I got his number from his friend, Tubbo, before you ask. Fucking gremlin wouldn’t give it to me himself.”

Of course he did.

Wilbur holds the phone up to his ear, frowning a bit when it goes straight to voicemail.

“He does have a phone, right?” he asks, glancing at Techno, who is feeling as though he *just might* have to spill the beans about the situation he’d walked in on.

“Maybe it’s dead...?” Techno supplies.

He hates being in these situations.

Wilbur, who is always pretty damn good at catching lies (especially coming from Techno), narrows his eyes at him.

“Tech, is there anything you may be forgetting to tell me about?”

Ah, hell.

He *really* hates peer pressure situations and the look that Wilbur’s giving him right now?

Uncomfortable.

Techno decides he has no choice.

Sorry, Tommy.

Chapter End Notes

techno & wilbur upon realizing they have the same tommy: father we have decided that we have a new baby brother.

phil, just trying to get through his day at work: that's nice mate

... so i've decided it.

karl & tommy duo r now gigglechamp duo

before u say it: yes phil is a good dad in this fic, i just for some reason have been writing him so far as kinda chill & uncaring but trust me he is actually a good dad \*sweats\* he just is kinda. oblivious that tommy's a literal child.

oh also, important stuff abt the fic:

because i write this fic mostly just for fun/shits and giggles, the actual plot of this story isn't fully fleshed out yet. i have a good idea of where it's going, but writing the actual like. stuff. for the direction it's going in. is super difficult lmao. i write one chapter a day because speedrun dudududu (and i'm incredibly excited abt writing this au for some reason). in saying this uh,,, i'm basically apologizing if the fic's plot isn't too great ): i'm working on it slowly but this chapter's kinda just a mess.

hopefully the upcoming domestic fluff in the next chapter will pay off for it :)

(not sure when the next chap will be out btw!!! hopefully soon, but no promises)

anywho, hope ur all well, and holy shit thank u sm for all the kudos & support wtf?? ): /pos

it means a lot that u enjoy my silly little fic and ur comments r all so sweet.

ik the end notes r basically j me ranting but fr tysm for all the support holy shit <3

# hold ur head up king, ur crown is falling !!1!1

## Chapter Summary

Wilbur bites his lower lip and nods, turning to the door and knocking again, this time a lot harder and impatiently.

He pauses and waits.

...

But nobody comes.

Wilbur looks at Techno, "...Do you reckon we should come back later?"

Techno goes to respond when there's a soft mumbling from the other side of the door.

Wilbur's expression hardens.

"Change of plans, *kick the fucking door down.*"

or, Tommy is found!! 4/4 sbi time :) come take ur sick-fic fluff content!

## Chapter Notes

guys? guys.

i've updated a bit early because... origins smp made me... so incredibly soft. i'm in agony /pos. found family feels.



take ur 4/4 & crimeboys & go <3

---

TWs: mentions / descriptions of BRUISING & SCARS !! it's a bit heavy near the end of the chap, pls be careful ): . implications of child abuse as well, and a character being pretty sick, & very vague mentions of tics (does not go into detail). (lmk if i missed any<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy is incredibly cold.

His bones feel like lead and his head won't move from off the ground.

His eyes feel like they're stuck closed permanently, so he just lets himself lay wherever he is, shivering a bit.

The feeling passes, after what feels like hours, and he can distantly hear a banging on the door, someone speaking, and then he flinches a little when the door bursts open.

He doesn't have the energy to open his eyes but he can feel someone walking in and he can feel their eyes on him.

Tommy's face scrunches up a bit uncomfortably and he snuffles. He can hear someone making soft noises at him, trying desperately to be comforting, but he can't seem to find the energy to reply.

Then, there's warmth, and it's all so overwhelming and *nice* that Tommy lets himself drift off to sleep again.

(Maybe if he's quiet, they won't hurt him.)

---

“This is where Tommy *lives*?” Wilbur says the second they exit Techno's definitely very expensive and sleek sports car, and the man's nose wrinkles at the sight of the worn down four story apartment complex in front of him.

“Don't look so surprised, Wil,” Techno nudges him lightly. “He barely makes any money with the two minimum wage jobs he has. Did you expect a castle or something?”

“No, obviously not, but I definitely didn't expect...” Wilbur trails off, grimacing at one of the neighbors who had walked out of their house, slamming the door shut so loudly it echoes against the cold and empty walls. “...*This*.”

Techno shrugs a bit, jostling the heavy black coat he's got draped around himself (“mostly to look cool”, Wilbur had said with narrowed eyes—the two knew full well that Techno never really got cold, even if it was nearing winter).

“We should hurry,” Techno mutters absentmindedly, taking a glance at his phone which reads one am. “Last time I came here at four in the morning, Tommy was mad at me for waking him up.”

Wilbur huffs a bit, walking past Techno with quick-paced strides, his curls ruffled with anxiety. The whole way here, they had been trying to call Tommy, but it kept going to voicemail. Wilbur even tried to text Tubbo to make *him* call Tommy, but the kid had said that Tommy was probably just moping around or something and forgot to charge his phone.

With that, Wilbur had piled himself into Techno's super fast sports car (claiming it was quicker than his own), and then Techno had decided to come along too, because he'd rather die than let Wilbur drive like a maniac in *his* car.

So here they are now, standing outside of Tommy's apartment, Wilbur nervously knocking on the door and sending death glares back and forth down the hallways, as if daring anyone to ask what he's doing.

When Wilbur knocks for the third time and nobody answers, he glancing worriedly at Techno with his eyebrows raised a little. He's got that look to him that screams *if he doesn't open the door right now, I'm going to break his front door*.

"Do you think he's home...?" Wilbur wonders, and Techno huffs.

"Wil, must I remind you that it's *one in the morning*?"

Wilbur bites his lower lip and nods, turning to the door and knocking again, this time a lot harder and impatiently.

He pauses and waits.

...

But nobody comes.

Wilbur looks at Techno, "...Do you reckon we should come back later?"

Techno goes to respond when there's a soft mumbling from the other side of the door.

Wilbur's expression hardens.

"Change of plans, *kick the fucking door down*."

Techno doesn't have to be asked twice.

Wilbur moves out of his way, watching patiently as Techno moves a little backwards and then rushes forwards, pivoting his shoulder and most of his body weight against the door.

As he expected, the door pops right open, a loud noise echoing through their ears as it does, as if the wood had crumbled underneath Techno's weight.

Wilbur shoots a glare at him.

"I'll, uh, fix it later. Along with the window," Techno reassures awkwardly.

Before Wilbur can quip, the man catches something right over Techno's shoulder and his eyes widen.

"...*Tommy?*" Wilbur whispers, pushing past Techno to kneel down beside the boy that's crumpled on the floor, curled up in a ball, looking smaller than he should. "Tommy, Toms, can you hear me?"

Tommy mutters something under his breath but it's incoherent. Even so, Wilbur lets out a shaky breath of relief, moving the boy's bangs out of his eyes delicately.

His hand recoils, though, and he shoots Techno a worried look.

"He- he's *burning up*," Wilbur whispers, fingers gliding across Tommy's forehead again worriedly. He adds in a bit of an accusing tone, "And he's got a plaster here... did you notice that earlier?"

“No, Wil, I didn’t touch or *look at* his forehead earlier,” Techno responds gruffly, sounding strangely frustrated.

Wilbur huffs, moving Tommy’s bangs out of his eyes again and muttering, “We- we can’t just leave him here like this...”

Techno doesn’t respond.

“Tech— he needs to see a doctor, uhm...” Wilbur trails off, clearly not knowing what to do. He looks up at Techno again, eyes full of remorse.

“Let’s just take him to Phil,” Techno responds eventually, averting his eyes. “We can go from there.”

Wilbur lets out a soft exhale before slowly picking the boy up bridal style, his worried expression being replaced with something softer when Tommy’s head lolls to the side into his chest. He resumes his curled up position, face scrunched up as though he’s having a bad dream.

“... hurts...” Tommy murmurs, and his voice is so quiet that only Wilbur hears it.

“It’s alright, Toms,” Wilbur mutters, jostling the boy so he’s got a tighter grip on him, wishing that he could say something more to help him calm down, “You’re alright. I’ve got you now.”

---

For once, Tommy is not cold when he sleeps.

Everything feels warm, as though he’s wrapped in a fluffy, weighted blanket.

He can feel something, like wind, brushing feather light against his bangs, and he curls up tighter into the warmth, afraid that if he lets go that it might leave.

Maybe just this once, he'll let himself have this.

Just this once.

And Tommy drifts off again, feeling distinctly calmer than he was before.

---

“... he going to be okay?”

Tommy frowns in his sleep.

“... think so... lots of bruises on his arms...”

What?

“Who do you think hurt him?”

Tommy opens his eyes, trying to blearily gaze around wherever the fuck it is he's at.

He feels like he's in a dream almost with how blurry everything is and how the edges of his eyes glisten with... tears, or something like it.

He blinks a bit.

“I’m not sure, but Wil, please don’t do anything rash...” a person is talking, but they sound so... *distant*? And yet so close by? It’s confusing. Tommy doesn’t like it.

Maybe if he just closes his eyes again, he will wake up and be back in his flat, curled up on the sofa (?)... no, he... did he fall asleep on the kitchen floor again?

No... how else would he be so warm?

It didn’t make sense.

What also doesn’t make sense is how incredibly groggy Tommy feels — it’s as if someone had taken all of his energy out of him with some kinda... fuckin’... *energy killer* or something.

(Distantly, he wishes someone were here, before completely erasing that thought from his head. He doesn’t *need* anyone. He is perfectly fine taking care of himself, just as he always has).

Tommy blinks again, trying to gain more focus on where it is he could be (a dream, for sure), but decides to just give in to the sleepiness weighing him down like a bunch of bricks.

He lets his eyes slip close...

And then there’s a door creaking open and the sound is so jarring and *real* that Tommy’s eyes fly open again and he even sits up bolt right. He regrets that decision immediately, his head spinning and his arms shaking as though he’d tried to do pull-ups or something, and he feels cold again.

“Tommy?” a familiar voice says, tone dripping with concern and relief. Tommy can’t see them though, even though he wishes he could as something warm takes his face in their hands, and his eyes meet brown ones and—

It clicks.

“Wi’bur?” Tommy mutters groggily, hating how hoarse his voice sounds when it comes out.

The brown eyes in front of him soften and fill with relief and he’s being pulled into something warm and solid, arms wrapping tightly around him (but not too tight to make him feel as though he’s being suffocated).

“Oh fucking hell,” Wilbur whispers into his ear, leaning his cheek into Tommy’s curls as the boy relaxes into his chest, “I thought— fucking hell, Tommy, what the fuck have you been doing to yourself?”

Tommy frowns. His head’s all foggy n’ shit.

“Where...?” Tommy leans out of Wilbur’s arms, slowly trying to drain the grogginess out of his head, pushing against the man’s chest, who easily (but reluctantly) lets go of him, “Where the fuck...?? Who...? *Where am I?*”

Wilbur sits on the edge of the bed, looking Tommy over carefully, and there’s that weird fucking concern again. If this is a dream, maybe Tommy can make some weird ugly monster come into the room and chuck Wilbur into the wall. That’d be kinda funny.

“You’re in, uhm... my house, Tommy,” Wilbur murmurs, and Tommy lets out a laugh—which is more like a cough, actually.

“Why am I dreaming... house?” Tommy murmurs, unable to piece together a full sentence. His head’s spinning again... he really shouldn’t have sat up so quickly. He squints at Wilbur. “You... you’re balding, big man...”



Wilbur blinks, and then the man's face contorts.

"Must you be a fucking immature little gremlin *constantly*?" The man cries, putting his face into his hands as Tommy snorts (before the action makes him sneeze), and Wilbur looks back at him again. He looks stuck between too emotions, his expression... is strange. It's kinda funny. "You should lay back down, Tommy. It's just prolonging your illness if you stay awake."

"No, you cant fuckin'— can't fuckin' tell me what to do," Tommy grumbles, shoving at Wilbur's hand that had appeared to push him back into a sleeping position, "Im a— a big fuckin' man, bitch, I can do what I want. And I'm not fuckin' ill, *you're* ill."

Wilbur rolls his eyes, "Toms, if you want to feel better, then you're gonna need some rest—"

"No, fuck you."

"Alright, you know what? Fine. Don't get rest. Suffer for all that I care."

Tommy's face droops.

He doesn't mean that, right?

Wilbur averts his eyes immediately, "Don't give me that look. Stop it. Fuck off."

"But Willlll," Tommy whines, "You were- you *bullied* me, you were so *mean*—"

Before Wilbur can respond, the door creaks open again, and Tommy flinches so hard he nearly hits the back of the bed's headrest.

“Calm down, Tommy, it’s just me,” a monotoned voice reassures, and Tommy blinks through the fogginess of his eyes to register the very tall pink haired man walking through the door, closely accompanied by... wait. Is that fucking...

“Phil?” Tommy murmurs. Now he *knows* this is a dream. There’s no way in hell that Phil would be in the same fucking house as these two mofos.

“Hey, mate,” Phil says gently, shutting the door behind him as he walks in. He’s carrying a strange bottle in his hand.

It looks vaguely familiar...

Tommy blinks and in one moment and the next, there’s gentle fingers brushing the bangs out of his face and there’s those worried brown eyes again.

“Tommy, you alright, bud?” Wilbur asks softly, and Tommy smiles at him, trying to be reassuring but it’s incredibly hard to when you feel like you’ve got one foot in the fuckin’ *grave*.

(Not that Tommy does, of course. He doesn’t die. He’s too cool for that).

“I am in tip top shape, Wilby,” he responds, patting the man’s face harshly, as if trying to slap him but being a bit too weak for it.

He drops his hand, frowning when he can hear Techno snorting to his right and someone chuckling that sounds distinctly like Phil.

The hell’s so funny?

He glances at Wilbur and—

The guy has *completely* frozen in place, his fingers poised right above Tommy's eyebrow, eyes wide and unblinking. Tommy nearly laughs at the thought of the guy looking like someone on a Netflix movie that's been paused in the middle of a conversation — he hasn't moved a *single inch*.

This is a weird fucking dream, Tommy decides.

He turns to Techno, who is sitting right beside him on the bed, leaning against the headrest and watching the scene with a shit eating look in his blood red eyes... no, no, they're *brown*, just like Wilbur's. *Not* red. Fucking dream brain. (Although red eyes? Incredibly pogchamp).

"Techno," Tommy says.

Techno looks at him now at being addressed, "Hey, kid."

Tommy giggles a bit at the look on Techno's face, "Hi, king."

Techno raises an eyebrow, an even stranger look crossing his face.

"Uh... hi, Tommy?"

"Hehe... hi, king."

Techno blinks, glancing from Tommy to the other two in the room, a genuine look of bewilderment on his face.

Wilbur, who has finally broken himself out of a bit of an error 404 moment, lets out a string of snickers.

Tommy doesn't really know what's so funny.

"Alright, mate," Phil interrupts, and Tommy looks in the man's general direction, blinking the haze out of his eyes again so that he can get a good look at the old man, who is dressed so... *casually*. It's hilarious, actually. Tommy hopes that when he wakes up, he can remember Phil being dressed in a black and emerald coloured robe so he can make fun of him. "I'm gonna give you some medicine, alright?"

What?

Wait, wait, no, backtrack.

Fuck that.

"Fuck that," Tommy announces, shooting Phil a death glare and then sneezing, "You're not—you're—that—no. This is *my* fuckin' dream and I- I'm not taking any of that vile fucking shit."

Phil raises an eyebrow curiously, casting a look in Wilbur's direction, who has a hand over his mouth, as though trying to conceal another laugh. Serves him right, too. Tommy would probably kill anyone who dared to laugh at him.

Probably.

"Tommy, mate, you need medicine so you feel better," Phil says eventually, taking a step towards the bed. Tommy glares at him.

“I feel just fine, Mr.— Mr. Phil,” Tommy sneezes again (at the perfect time, too, as both Techno and Wilbur have snorted at his choice of names for Phil), “I am— I’m in my *prime*.”

Tommy emphasizes the word prime with a deepening of his voice. Bad idea. He starts coughing again.

Fuck this dumb dream and it’s ability to let him cough in front of these three idiots. Even in a dreamlike state, he must retain his reputation.

“Sure, mate,” Phil smiles at him and it’s so kind and *warming* that Tommy feels a wave of emotions crash over him. He doesn’t feel so cold anymore. “But just for, you know, in case purposes, could you please take this medication?”

Tommy considers it.

“No, I don’t think I will,” he decides.

Phil sighs, “Okay... guess you won’t get to watch Netflix then.”

...

Now just wait a damn minute.

“Phil, Phil,” Tommy splutters, rubbing at his eyes with the palms of his hands tiredly so he can glare at Phil, “I- king, *king*, are you gaslight girl boss gatekeeping me right now?”

Phil blinks.

“Am I what?” the man says, sounding thoroughly confused as Wilbur lets out a string of barking laughs.

Tommy decides to ignore him, as per usual.

“You’re gaslighting me right now and- and I’m not falling for it,” he declares. He’s so cool.

“Tommy, I’m not *gaslighting* you,” Phil says. He sounds incredibly tired. Tommy knows how he feels.

Maybe.

“Look, mate, if you don’t drink the medicine, no Netflix *or* ice cream for you.”

...

Touché.

Tommy has decided that Phil wins this one.

But only because he’s so cool.

“Give me the fucking medicine, old man.”

---

Wilbur sits in the chair he's dragged over from the next room beside Tommy's bed, his head perched up on his crossed arms and hair covering his eyes as he snores softly.

Tommy's curled up right beside him on the bed, one of his hands reaching out towards Wilbur, but not by a lot.

Techno stands in the doorway, eyeing Phil who is looking at the scene fondly.

"He's never gonna let that go, is he?" Phil wonders aloud, undoubtedly thinking of the absolutely hilarious nickname that a half-awake Tommy had called Wilbur.

"Nope, and neither am I," Techno responds.

Phil just snorts a little, walking out of the doorway, carrying the now empty bottle that he'd brought in. Techno follows, closing the door softly behind him so that the only noise it makes is a tiny *click*.

Phil's facial expression changes a bit, shifting to something a bit more worried.

"Techno..." he begins, frowning a bit. "I... do you think that someone could be... could *have* been hurting him back at home?"

Techno sighs.

He had thought about this already when they'd first brought Tommy home and pulled off two of the layers of sweaters he had on (leaving simply the normal iconic baseball T-shirt underneath). There were a ton of bruises on his arms and plasters wrapping around his wrists... there were even some wrapped around his neck.

The kid looked like he had been through a car accident (or three).

It was... horrifying, honestly.

Wilbur was the most terrified with the discovery — he's refused to leave Tommy's side ever since, saying that it made much more sense why the kid wore heavy sweaters even in the summertime and how everytime Wilbur would touch his arm or punch him playfully, Tommy would flinch or recoil.

(The expression on Wilbur's face was a storm of rage and mourning — he looked like a father who had just lost his son and was now preparing to go on a murderous rampage. It was a bit hilarious how dramatic he was being, but Techno found it hard to disagree with the emotions).

"I don't know," Techno admits, scratching the back of his neck, finger tugging at his emerald earring, a nervous habit he had (or *tic*, as Wilbur had called it once). "I think that he... may be hiding something about... his past but it's really none of our business."

Phil gives a sad smile.

"You're right, it's not," he says, even though his tone of voice begs to differ. "We have no choice but to wait out what happens. We can't force any answers out of him, obviously..."

Techno exhales a bit.

"When he wakes up, though...?"

Phil's expression darkens a tad.

Obviously, Tommy had no clue about the three being family (supposedly), much less them being legitimate *supervillains*.



“I don’t think we should tell him that yet,” Phil murmurs.

Techno agrees silently.

Hopefully one day.

---

“You’re being a bitch,” Tommy grumbles sleepily, smacking Wilbur’s hand away from his forehead halfheartedly, turning his head so that he can properly bury his face into the feather pillow.

Wilbur groans in frustration, running his free hand down his face, his right one (holding a wet washcloth over Tommy’s head) still poised in the air.

“Tommy, you’ve got a fucking *fever*. I’m trying to *help* you,” Wilbur seethes, touching the boy’s shoulder lightly, grimacing when the kid moves his head a fraction to literally hiss at him.

“This- this is a *terrible* fucking dream,” Tommy grumbles, turning his head to bury it further into his pillow, as if trying to burrow into it like a fucking raccoon. “*Horrible.*”

Wilbur rolls his eyes.

“You’re not *dreaming*, Toms.”

“Mmm, yes, I am,” Tommy hums, moving his face to give Wilbur a prideful expression, “And- and, if I wanted, I could *totally* pick you up and throw you through that fucking wall.”

Wilbur raises his eyebrow boredly.

“Really?”

“Yeah, yes. I could,” Tommy sounds like he’s trying to convince himself.

Wilbur snorts.

“Do it then,” he challenges, crossing his arms.

Tommy blinks at him a little, his blue eyes still a bit foggy with sleep, then turns away from Wilbur so his back is to him, huffing as he readjusts himself, “No, hmm, I don’t think I will. See, I’ve decided I’m not gonna just to- just to *spite* you.”

“Of course you are.”

“I am! I am! Don’t take that fucking patronizing tone with me, bitch!” Tommy shrieks... before coughing a bit, curling into himself, like he’s trying to become as small as possible.

Wilbur softens a little.

“Maybe you should go to sleep, Tommy,” he suggests gently.

“Maybe you should be less uglier, Wilbur,” Tommy mocks.

Wilbur should’ve expected that one, honestly.

“Fucking—” Wilbur exhales. He feels like screaming. Out of all the kids that he decided to get attached to, why did it have to be this fucking gremlin?

“You’re an asshole and I hate you,” Wilbur decides.

Tommy gasps, turning his head so he’s looking over his shoulder at Wilbur, “You- you don’t mean that.”

Wilbur narrows his eyes at him.

Tommy’s face morphs into something akin to... puppy dog eyes?

He looks... *exactly* like a golden retriever puppy.

Or maybe a baby raccoon?

...

It’s strangely endearing.

And irritating.

Wilbur averts his eyes angrily.

“Don’t look at me like that, you stupid child.”

“I’m not a child,” Tommy grumbles.

“Oh really? And I’m not six foot five.”

Tommy hums, shifting a bit again.

“I’ve decided I’m going to sleep and- and that I’m gonna wake up now so I don’t have to hear your stupid voice anymore,” he states matter-of-factly.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!” Tommy huffs, pulling the covers over his head so that only a few blonde curls poke out, ““Night, king.”

Wilbur smiles a little, leaning his chin into his palm, watching the boy fully relax.

“Night, Tommy.”

## Chapter End Notes

wilbur, techno, & phil being in the same room, taking care of tommy:

tommy, drowsy & incredibly sick: yeah this is definitely a dream lmao

this chapter is heavily inspired by that one chapter in tumoasd where tommy gets sick lmao (fic is linked in the inspos for this one, pls go read it, it's amazing :D)

origins smp... i'm... man. i'm in shambles. i'm a sucker for family dynamics & they really did that, huh?

i wrote this literally after watching tommy & ranboo's origins streams. i am speed /j

anyways, 4/4 content is here !! ... kind of!

they r starting to get kinda sus of tommy, but hey. fluff & crimeboys, my two favourite things. they r brothers. <3

ALSO: before i get any fuckin comments. this IS ALL MEANT TO BE TAKEN PLATONICALLY. pls do not take this as /romantic holy shit. do not be weirdchamp!! they r all family. none of the relationships in this fic r /romantic. thank u for coming to my ted talk <3 /srs /nm

(song rec of the night bc it reminds me of found family: duvet by bōa)

# oh my fucking god, is he fucking dead-

## Chapter Summary

“Fuck,” Wilbur hisses, watching the figure retreating into the shadows, running his hands through his hair.

That’s not fucking good.

For all Wilbur knows, that could be a fuckin’ hero in disguise or something going off to fetch one of the higher ranks, and Wilbur *really* doesn’t want to deal with those pricks right now.

or, gigglechamp duo’s return, tommy’s still super fucking oblivious, phil is also oblivious but also very tired, & tommy sees something he shouldn’t have. what else is new?

## Chapter Notes

so i decided to become a problem and write angst today

---

**TWs:** mentions of disordered eating, flashback/nightmare, derealization, cursing (?), possessive behaviour (it’s all PLATONIC, though, as always, do not be weirdchamp!), & some violence. (pls let me know if i forgot any, thank u <3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur looks uncomfortable as he holds Tommy in his arms in the back seat of Phil’s car, the kid out like a light with his blonde curls smushed up against Wilbur’s shoulder.

(Techno had snapped a photo earlier when Wilbur had first scooped Tommy up because the kid had literally drooled on Wilbur's favourite jumper and the guy couldn't have cared less).

(“*Attached*,” Techno had whispered to Phil while showing him the photo, earning a sharp kick to his ankle from Wilbur).

Even now in the back seat, Wilbur hasn't let go of Tommy even though Phil's already told him countless times that he is not adopting a fucking *eighteen year old*.

(Even though he was starting to doubt more and more by the day that Tommy was actually eighteen, that didn't change what he knew... for now. Also, he's fucking exhausted. Two kids is enough to deal with).

Wilbur keeps proving that he won't let the idea go, though.

He *really* wants a younger brother.

Too bad for him.

Phil's too tired for this shit.

“Do we really have to take him back to that... place?” Wilbur whines, wincing at the mere thought of Tommy's so-called *apartment* and Phil rolls his eyes.

(Phil *clearly* hasn't seen the inside of that hellhole, Wilbur thinks bitterly).

“We couldn't have just let him *stay* in our secret base, mate,” Phil responds, a little exasperated but understanding.

If it weren't so dangerous to have (what he assumes to be) a literal adult in their villain hideout, then he would've reconsidered letting Tommy sleep away the fever back in a more comfortable bed.

But... they can't take many chances.

(Even if he is fond of Tommy, it wasn't like the kid was... well, a kid or anything. Not just some stray that Phil can adopt, even with how much he feels parental towards him in the bookstore sometimes).

But... family is priority, and especially now that they have most of the fucking heroes on their ass after what happened the month before, *safety* is key.

Phil would be more laid back about this if it weren't for the fact that Tommy was so strangely indifferent around villains such as the Blade.

Wilbur whines a little but relents, leaning his head against the car window. He knows this isn't an argument he wants to get involved with — after all, the whole thing that happened was *partially* his fault.

They continue driving in silence, and then Wilbur lights up, his head popping up a little to glance out the window, "Phil, Phil- can we stop at the McDonald's?"

"No."

"Oh come on, please? I want to leave Tommy some nuggets for him to eat when he wakes up. You saw how he looks, he needs to eat more."

"We're not leaving him nuggets, you little shit," Phil sighs.



“Fine,” Wilbur pouts, leaning back against the window and clutching Tommy tighter, the kid looking completely peaceful in his sleep.

Eventually, Phil pulls the car into the apartment complex that Techno had put into the directory, turning in his seat to give Wilbur a stern look, “Are you going to be able to put him to sleep and actually leave empty handed, or am I gonna have to come up there to make sure you do?”

Wilbur glares at him.

Phil sighs, turning to Techno, who is scrolling mindlessly through Twitter.

“Tech, can you go with him so I can actually get some sleep before I have to go to the open the book shop in...” Phil takes this moment to glance at the clock on his car, grimacing when it reads six am, “... thirty minutes?”

Techno glances at him, before exhaling, shutting his phone off, “Alright.”

“I can do it myself,” Wilbur says, even as he struggles to open the car door while simultaneously holding Tommy with a vice-like grip.

“Sure you can,” Techno hums, exiting the car and then opening Wilbur’s door, earning a sharp glare from his twin before the two stalk off back up the steps of Tommy’s apartment complex.

Wilbur steps into the apartment, making a face at how broken the door is still, making a mental note to chew Techno out about how *someone could’ve come in and stolen Tommy’s things, you fucking idiot*, before remembering that...

Well, Tommy doesn’t really have things.

Wilbur's nose shrivels at the thought and at how incredibly... *small* Tommy's apartment is.

(He hadn't gotten a good look at it when he'd come before, a bit too focused on his little brother laying on the floor looking like a ghost).

To an untrained eye, the flat looks bigger because there's literally no furniture in it to take up space (minus the weird sofa pushed up against the wall), but it's incredibly tiny.

Wilbur almost takes Tommy and runs back to Phil's car right then and there.

As he's thinking of a tenth argument he could possibly use to win Phil over, Techno's hand lands on his shoulders and the man takes Tommy out of his arms with ease, Wilbur protesting immediately.

"Shut up, Wil, you're gonna wake him up," Techno says simply, and it's enough for Wilbur to close his mouth, eyes narrowing as Techno carefully places Tommy's crumpled form down onto the sofa.

Boots crunch against broken glass on the carpet, and Techno turns to Wilbur, "I've got some cleaning up I have to do before he wakes up. Do you want to help or not?"

Wilbur bites the inside of his cheek nervously.

He *really* doesn't like where Techno's heading with this.

"Sure," he mutters, albeit reluctantly, and Techno motions with his head for Wilbur to come closer to Tommy.

"I need you to keep him sleeping," Techno says, eyes boring into Wilbur's.

Wilbur hesitates, and then nods.

*Anything to protect family*, he thinks, despite the voice that keeps whispering that Tommy's family, too.

Techno puts a hand on his shoulder and then stands, moving towards the broken door.

Wilbur bends down beside Tommy, carefully sweeping baby hairs out of his face, and begins to sing.

---

*"Please don't," he whispers into the open air which bites coldly at his face, a hand reaching out from underneath his cloak, trembling towards the person in front of him. "You promised."*

*There's a blank face of no emotions and Tommy's whole world crumbles in front of him.*

---

It's become a tradition, Tommy realizes, for him to wake up absolutely horrified from a nightmare.

He sits bolt upright, arms wrapped around himself, trying to breathe in and out the way that he had been taught as a kid (all those times he'd panic in front of others, all those times he was called names, and he *still* doesn't know how to calm himself down properly).

As expected, it doesn't work too well.

Of course.

So, as per usual, he improvises, stretching his hands out and curling them into the soft cushions of his sofa, into the warm sweater that is wrapped loosely around him, and that's when it clicks all at once.

He... he doesn't remember a fucking *thing* from the night before.

At least, not really.

He can remember bits and pieces - Quackity stopping by, The Blade breaking his fucking window, and whatever that weird dream was about his boss and those two idiots at the bookstore.

But not... much.

The dream he'd had... felt so strangely *real*, as most of his nightmares do. He's never really had a dream like that before. Because of what *happened*, all his dreams are sort of jokes at this point. They start out nice and cozy, like a warm hug or what he *thinks* someone loving him feels like, before the dream pulls a 180 and becomes a nightmare.

He never has good dreams anymore.

So what the fuck was that?

A chill goes up his spine and he runs his hands up and down his arms, letting out a soft exhale as he tries to get a grip on his surroundings.

He's in his flat, that much is obvious. He was also sitting on his sofa, fingers digging into the cushions as a sort of anchor to reality, and... well, everything looks normal.

... Right?

So why does it feel so off?

Maybe it's just the fact Quackity had visited the night before. Everything feels strange for a couple days after that guy visits. Not that Quackity's a bad presence - it's actually the opposite. The guy's funny when he's not so focused on that weird business regime he's got going on. He just kinda... gives off that *vibe* that just sticks with you.

Tommy shudders again and then his phone buzzes. He flinches. He could've sworn that it was dead the night before...?

Oh, well. Maybe in his half-awake state of mind, he had put it on the charger. Sounds like something he'd do, honestly.

Grabbing his phone, he nearly drops it again - he can already hear Tubbo scolding him in the back of his mind about the amount of cracks in his phone - because it's *ten in the morning*.

Holy shit, he is so late to work.

Karl's gonna—

Actually, no, Karl won't really care. He doesn't mind at all taking care of Tommy's shift (he's made that abundantly clear many times when Tommy's trudged in the store half awake, but Tommy never lets him). Maybe he should stay home and feel better... his head still aches horribly, but his cough is mostly gone.

Which is a bit strange, but hey, his immune system is just cracked or something.

With reluctance, Tommy slides off the sofa, stumbling a bit as he does and balancing himself against the wall before heading into the other room to change into his more "work-fashioned"

clothes. He makes sure to add a sweater overtop of it — Eldritch Wings is always *freezing*.

And he's more than certain that he'll have company today — Techno and Wilbur's stupid asses probably tripping over themselves wondering where he was the day before. It'll be kinda funny, but mostly irritating.

Before Tommy leaves his apartment, he slips a pocket knife into his pocket. Just in case. You never know what kind of company you can meet in the alleyways at night (and a couple nights before just proved that he should carry a knife around more often).

(Tommy doesn't happen to notice that his front door no longer makes a soft creaking noise when closed as it has done for the six to seven months he's lived there).

---

“Tommy, why are you here?” Karl asks with a frown, arms full of a box of books labeled *Non-fiction*. His multiple layers of bracelets make soft jingling noises when Karl readjusts the box in his arms so he can carry it easier.

“What do you mean?” Tommy responds, blinking a bit as he takes his seat behind the counter at the front of the store, “Oh, uh— right. I'm sorry for being late to work, but for some reason my stupid alarm didn't go off this morning and I think I had some strange fucking fever dreams last night?”

Tommy sighs, running his hands shakily through his curls, “I dunno, man. I'm sorry if I put you through hell trying to cover my shift.”

Karl beams at him, “No, no, I mean— dude, you're not supposed to be here. Didn't you call Phil and say you wanted *two* days off?”

Tommy blinks.

Oh, right. He *had* said that.

Huh.

“Oh,” Tommy laughs nervously, running a hand up and down his neck, “Uh, yeah, but hey! Look, alright, I’m here *now*, and I could use the money so... you don’t have to work *too* hard now. It’s a win win for the both of us.”

Karl places the box of books on one of the tables near a bookshelf, tilting his head at Tommy, “Dude, you do know that I don’t care about taking care of your shifts, right? It doesn’t bother me. I *like* spending time here. I get to read books in my free time. It’s like my dream job.”

Karl grins at him again, one of his big toothy grins that seem to take up his whole face and show off his dimples, “Don’t be afraid to take some time off, Tommy. I’ve done it before and usually taking a break can help you feel a lot better, you know? It’s no big deal, man. You could use some more rest. Getting sick is so dog water.”

Tommy stares at him.

What the fuck is he talking about?

It sounds genuine and nice, but Tommy’s head still can’t really compute much right now.

Without noticing the look on Tommy’s face, Karl picks up the box of books again, and then snorts before walking off, “If you *do* stay, though, can you do me a favour and go pop your head into Phil’s office or something? I think I heard him pacing in there earlier. He seems stressed out. Go make him laugh or something.”

Tommy stares at him some more before sighing.

Karl, as always, has made him feel better by saying the weirdest shit.

He enjoys him for that.

Karl's great. Karl supremacy, he decides. Fuck everyone else.

(Except maybe Wilbur. He's cool too. Maybe).

(No, nah. He's not).

Speaking of that prick, though...

"Hey, Karl, did you uh, happen to see if that lanky nitch and his brother came in yet today?" Tommy asks, a bit reluctantly and out of nowhere. He doesn't want to seem like he actually cares if they come into the shop to see him or not. Because he doesn't. Not at all.

Karl, who has set the box of books down again, doesn't glance his way, "Nope! Not today."

Tommy nods, then glances towards Phil's office in the back of the store. He's never actually been in there long enough for him to know what it's like in that weird... whatever the fuck he called it?

*Nest* of some sorts?

*Sanctuary*, maybe?

Whatever it was to Phil.



Tommy hadn't even gone in the place for his interview to apply at the bookstore. Instead, he'd had it on the fourth story at this little table near a bay window, sitting rather anxiously in a cushioned chair while Mr. Phil smiled eagerly at him from the other side of the table.

(It's really pretty up there, actually. It's probably Tommy's favourite place to go in all of Eldritch Wings, even if he rarely gets the chance to slip away from work and head up there. You can see over the tops of quite a few buildings from that window. Tommy can only imagine how pretty it is in the wintertime...)

Running his hands down his face, Tommy shoots another look in Karl's direction, who is now putting the books from in the box on their respective shelves.

Great.

Tommy sighs and walks towards Phil's office, hands shoved into his pockets. He might as well go see him anyways, right? After all, the boss should know that he is not, in fact, at home.

So why is it so... awkward that he's gonna go talk to Phil?

He's spoken to the guy a couple times before.

Is it the fact that he's so intimidating or...?

Tommy can't really get a grasp on it because Phil isn't really *that* intimidating (if you look past that one time).

So, with a final leap of faith, Tommy reaches out and knocks meekly on the big oak door that leads to Phil's office.

(Or, at least, what he assumes is Phil's office. Who knows where the guy actually works).

He waits a couple seconds, rocking back and forth on his feet, casting anxious looks over his shoulder (as if trying to telepathically ask Karl for help), when the oak door creaks open, revealing a Phil who wears a rather strained smile.

Then, the man's fades for a split second upon seeing Tommy, and then it's back again as if nothing had happened.

The fuck?

"Oh, Tommy," Phil says, blinking a little, "I thought you were staying home today?"

"Yeah, uh," Tommy scratches the back of his neck, staring at Phil's shirt. It's a deep green collared shirt that makes him look all *business-y*. "I decided I would come into work today because I.. uh, think I'm feeling a bit better."

Phil smiles at him warily, "I'm glad you're feeling better, Tommy, but maybe you *should* take another day off, just to make sure. Take some medicine, get some rest..."

Tommy frowns.

Huh?

He wants Tommy *not* to come to work?

That's...

Oh.

Then it clicks, and realization dawns on Tommy.

“Oh,” Tommy mutters, and Phil’s eyebrows raise before the boy continues, sounding a little choked, “Is... uhm... Mr. Phil, is this your way of telling me that I’m fired or something?”

Phil’s eyes widen a fraction, the man holding his hands up to immediately backpedal, “No, no, that- Tommy, that isn’t the case at all, I’m just worried about you.”

Tommy’s shoulders unravel a bit and a wave of relief washes over him. Okay, so Phil wasn’t mad about him taking the previous day off or at the fact he was pretty late to work today...

(Not like he expected him to be, at least).

“Okay,” Tommy exhales, shaking his head.

“Really, Tommy. I *am* just worried about you, kid.” Phil repeats, sending him a genuine smile full of warmth. It’s like the one Tommy can distantly remember from his strange dream last night.. kind and so... strangely familiar.

Oh, well.

He’s had weird dreams before.

What else is new?

“Why are you so worried for me?” Tommy begins, now taking the teasing route because he doesn’t like how cheesy this got all of a sudden, “Are you- Mr. Phil, I’m not one of your *sons*, you know, you shouldn’t worry about me.”

A flicker of something strange crosses on Phil's face, but it's quickly covered by another smile and a soft chuckle from the man.

"I worry about all my employees, you little shit," he says with a sigh.

Tommy nods. This is true. Only people who care about their employees would beat the shit out of a customer for them.

"Well, uh, thank you for caring," Tommy hums, and Phil's expression softens for a moment, "But don't get all fuckin' weird about it or I might just have to put you in a home."

Phil's amused expression immediately flattens, "What the fuck are you talking about."

Tommy grins.

*Mission accomplished*, he thinks to himself. Karl had said to make him laugh. He never said anything about immediately making him suffer afterwards.

---

The café shift is... incredibly quiet tonight.

Tommy sits behind the counter with his chin in his hand, yawning.

There's literally *nobody* in the café. It's so... odd.

(Not odd enough for Tommy to really give a shit, but still pretty odd).

The again, it does get like this every so often.

Maybe every other week or so, the small wave of customers that come into Tommy's shop just cease to exist and then it's just him there, sitting behind the counter and occasionally wiping off tables just to do *something*.

Just him, the ambience of the ticking clock behind him, and occasionally, the YouTube videos on his phone.

It's half past one when he realizes that it's just *one of those days* where the graveyard shift lives up to its name and decides to close up a tad early. He knows that Sam wouldn't get mad at him for doing so— he always recommends Tommy close up before two-thirty anyways.

Tommy pulls his sweater tighter around himself as he walks down the alleyway, heading towards his apartment complex. He's struck with a severe pang of déjà vu, suddenly very grateful that it isn't raining this time. It would suck to have to deal with a fucking cold again.

It is getting a bit more chilly this late at night, though, so Tommy breathes hot air into the palms of his hands and rounds a corner.

That's when all hell breaks loose.

He should've known at this time of night - the time of night people call Villain's Hour for a fucking *reason*, not just because it sounds cool and scares children into not sneaking out.

He should've known that there would literally be villains out tonight doing whatever their little crime hearts desire.

And just Tommy's luck, too, to look round the corner to see a fucking fight between a top ranking supervillain matched against a pretty top ranking hero (not by a lot but still by quite some range that it makes a shiver go up Tommy's spine).

To make matters worse, he recognizes that fucking deep navy blue cloak wrapped around the supervillain's shoulders with the silver linings around the edges and burn marks from where the guy's destroyed literal *buildings* with his insane use of bombs.

He recognizes that mask settled over the villain's face, beautiful but promises of something dark if you were to get too close, much like a vampire or a faerie in all those fairytales Karl's introduced him to.

Tommy takes a careful step back away from the scene and curses every god that he can think of.

Fighting it out on the other side of the alleyway is none other than *the Bard* himself and... if Tommy's memory serves him correctly... that other person is presumably Mimic.

Mimic's not even a fucking hero, though.

... Right?

Tommy can't really remember... there's a vague recollection of the guy being some sort of weird vigilante type thing?

Fucking hell.

Why *him*?

Why is it always *him* that has to see these fucking assholes decking it out?

Then again...

It's fun watching the fight, but from this close, it's practically a death wish.

...

Eh, it's fine.

Tommy Innit never dies.

With that in mind, Tommy maneuvers so he's a little more hidden behind the corner of the alleyway, eyes narrowed as he watches the Bard's movements for a minute.

He's gotta admit... the guy's a good fighter.

(Not as good as the other members of his three-membered cult, but... he's alright. Maybe).

After a couple hisses from the Bard and a couple shouts from Mimic, Tommy decides that he might as well get the hell out of here while he still can.

He turns, trying to walk quickly away from the fight, when something whizzes past his ear that he can only presume is a knife.

He turns as quickly as he can, instincts flared, and catches a glimpse of a card lying on the pavement beside his shoe.

And then he sees Mimic crumple to the ground and he acts purely on what his brain tells him to do.

*Get the fuck out of there.*

Someone shouts at him but it's too late and Tommy runs like hell, his hood pulled over his head, trainers slapping loudly against the pavement and echoing through the alleyways.

He just needs to make it to the Underground. There's bright lights down there that never go out so he can actually see what the fuck's going on instead of potentially fighting blindly for his life.

(For once, he's glad that he remembered to bring that pocket knife this morning).

Tommy can hear someone curse loudly behind him but he ignores it, rounding a corner and pushing himself to run faster despite the way his chest and back are practically *erupting* in pain.

Maybe he should've just taken the day off like Phil had suggested.

---

"Fuck," Wilbur hisses, watching the figure retreating into the shadows, running his hands through his hair.

That's not fucking good.

For all Wilbur knows, that could be a fuckin' hero in disguise or something going off to fetch one of the higher ranks, and Wilbur *really* doesn't want to deal with those pricks right now.

"We'll finish this later," Wilbur hisses at the vigilante who now lays crumpled on the ground in a bloody heap, a gentle threat that lingers like a promise.



(While Mimic isn't quite dead yet, he's on the edge of it).

Wilbur disappears into the shadows, enjoying the frustrated movements of the vigilante who he's sworn as his enemy, the man shouting after him in anger.

(Wilbur holds back a petty laugh, wanting to return to the fight and finish it *finally*, after months of fighting...)

*But,*

Wilbur's got some other business to attend to.

He's gotta find that guy.

*Leave no witnesses*, as Phil always says.

## Chapter End Notes

GUYS!!! :D gigglechamp duo!! they're here!! it's them!! underrated duo my beloved. they r so pog.

also uh. yeah... \*sweats\* definitely nothing else going on there.

wilbur power reveal !! lets go!! basically it's the same as per usual in these sort of fics - his power comes through his voice . he can lull people to sleep (which works the best in combat when someone is too strong), and sometimes he's able to make them do what he wants. it comes with a limiter, though, so it's not entirely OP (:

but guys. guys. onto other news, my favourite bookmark i've gotten so far on this fic is literally just the words "fck yeha". i literally laughed so fucking hard at that one. u guys r so sweet & funny. i adore u all. /gen

ALSO LMAO ????? i'm an idiot??? i realized that i don't reply to comments like. ever. because my dumbass brain reads them and thinks of a reply but literally never writes it  
???? help ????

anyways, apologies for ranting in the end notes again (it's tradition now), but genuinely thank u guys so much for the kudos??? holy shit??? i really appreciate it omfg <3 u guys r so nice. ur comments make my day fr ): /pos /gen

it is 3 am i've got one foot in the grave, if i do not return play wilbur soot in my memory  
/hj

# that funny relatable moment when ur brother figure hunts u down

## Chapter Summary

He fucking *hates* this city with its dumb tall walls that seem to silently judge you, hates the Underground with how fucking suffocating it can be, and he especially despises every single hero and villain that ever set foot into Manberg.

Tommy lets out another shuddering cough, curling up on the ground in front of his door, arms wrapped tightly around himself as he chokes on a sob.

It's stupid, really, for him to be crying like this.

or, Tommy just barely escapes a famous supervillain, Wilbur is having a shit time, and Techno decides that he (just maybe) is going soft. Oh, and also more giggglechamp duo bc I am soft for them :)

## Chapter Notes

bogos binted ???

---

**TWs:** derealization, panic attacks, mentions of death. (pls lmk if i missed any<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The turns and twists of the alleyway seem to be endless as Tommy runs through them, coughing into the darkness and trying to keep his head down low as he turns corners, navigating himself through the maze of buildings.

It almost feels like trying to run through the fucking Labyrinth with how many corners he feels himself skidding on his trainers to, hand clutching his throat as he tries to catch his breath in the fog-plagued air.

Luckily for him, Tommy knows this part of the city by heart. He could probably draw a decently accurate map of it with his eyes closed if you asked him to.

(With the amount of times he's had to run like this through it, you'd expect him to by now).

By the time he makes it down the steps and into the Underground, Tommy's nearly gasping for air, his trainers making loud echoing noises against the empty and blank walls that practically *laugh* at him, at his oncoming demise.

When he leans against one of them, trying to catch his breath, it feels almost like the suffocating walls of the Underground are watching him, judging his every moment. (This is why he prefers to just *walk* home instead.)

He knows better, though, than to just stop here at the entrance of the Underground to merely catch his breath. He shouldn't stop at all, even if he can hardly breath — it's one of the basic rules of society when there's a fucking *supervillain* chasing after you.

Then again...

He probably should've known better from the fucking *start*. Watching villains fight is one of the most risky things you can do (depending on which villain it is, obviously).

If it had been one of the lesser known villains - like Liege, who Tommy actually hadn't seen on the streets in a *long* time - it wouldn't have been such a big deal.

However... he was watching a member of the fucking *Syndicate* fight. That in itself could get him in some deep shit with the cult-like thing that the Syndicate was.

(He's usually more careful when watching the Blade or Archangel fight — the two get so involved with their enhancements that normally sensing another person's presence doesn't come as easily as it does to the Bard).

However... seeing a member of the Syndicate potentially kill someone in cold blood?

That was on a different level of *not good*.

The kind of level that usually results in him ending up six feet beneath the fucking dirt.

Tommy curses under his breath, heaving a bit— and then he tenses up when he hears someone coming from above.

Fuck.

He'd barely had the chance to catch his breath.

Quickly, Tommy pulls his hood back up over his hair and makes a mad run for it, twisting around the corners of the Underground, fingers digging into the fabric of his hoodie, desperately pleading under his breath with what energy he has left that he can make it onto the train.

He can hear someone far behind him (but close enough). There's someone hissing, almost as if in his ear, and he rounds another corner. He knows the layout of the Underground better than he does the layout of the city itself.

(As much as Tommy hates it down here, he's found himself in more than a few sticky situations where he's ended up having to memorize most of the Underground's layout in order to survive).

As he turns the corner, he nearly cries out in relief because there's the train, in it's spectacular glory, waiting for him. He just hopes that it leaves before the Bard has the chance to board it with him.

As Tommy approaches the train, he stops and glances over his shoulder. Always a bad idea in these situations - the Bard is ganging on him, as to be expected with the man's terrifying height, trench coat flaring out behind him.

Tommy turns and he bends his knees and jumps with all of his force over the gap between station and train, tucking his knees up into his chest to somersault onto the train.

As quick as possible, he levels onto his knees, turning to stare wide-eyed at the Bard, who has stopped right at the gap, the train doors closing between the two.

Tommy can't help the way his heart flutters with relief. He'd made it out *alive*. He had escaped one of the most notorious fucking villains and he hadn't fucking died.

Tommy lets himself drop onto the floor of the train, ignoring how possibly *dirty* it is to catch his breath, the steady rocking of the cart calming his racing heart a little.

For once, he's glad he had brought his pocket knife, even if he didn't have to use it.

---

Wilbur stares, completely in shock, as the cloaked figure full on *dives* into the train's open doors — before Wilbur can move forward and grab the person's hoodie, the train doors close and lights flick into darkness.

He can see the figure kneeling down and just barely he can catch the faintest glimpse of a red and white coloured hoodie.

(It's all he needs to track the fucker down, really).

The train moves with a speed Wilbur would never be able to catch up with and the man lets out another string of curses in anger, hands tangling into the hair underneath his beanie.

He's so fucked.

It's normal that you have a witness to one of your crimes. Usually, you want one to send the correct message, but this... it was different.

This sort of witness rarely ever occurs — but when it *does* happen (especially in such tight corners as that, in such places where you wouldn't normally expect bystanders), what you're doing is *meant* to be secretive.

No witnesses are allowed to just escape with their lives. Wilbur's known this for years, since the beginning. They've never let people who have seen a little too much live unless it was to send a message.

(Wilbur knew a thing or two about sending messages).

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur stands carefully in the Underground, the steam from the train making him cough a little.

He considers his options — if he were Technoblade, he probably would've smashed through the fucking train doors and killed the witness right then and there, but he's not Technoblade and super strength isn't his enhancement (not that he isn't strong, just not strong enough to bulldoze through a fucking train car).

If he had been Philza, he would've flown through the train tunnels after the cart at a quick enough speed that it wouldn't result in him ending up hit by a fucking train.

So, in this instance...

Wilbur waits.

---

Tommy collapses onto his front door, coughing and heaving, his arms shaking violently.

When the train had arrived to his section of the district, he had ran all the way from the Underground to his apartment buildings, paranoia and anxiety bubbling up in his throat and making his eyes sting.

He fucking *hates* this city with its dumb tall walls that seem to silently judge you, hates the Underground with how fucking suffocating it can be, and he *especially* despises every single hero and villain that ever set foot into Manberg.

Tommy lets out another shuddering cough, curling up on the ground in front of his door, arms wrapped tightly around himself as he chokes on a sob.

It's stupid, really, for him to be crying like this.

Sure, he almost died, but...

He's done that before, so why does it bother him so much? Why does it make his skin crawl the way he'd heard the Bard hiss at him, the way that when he'd seen Mimic drop to the ground in an unmoving heap that he knew it was also sealing his fate?

He runs his hands over his face and covers his mouth to conceal the sobs that are threatening to pour out. He can't cry. He *shouldn't* cry.



It would be dumb to cry. He's gone through this before, he should be used to it, *numb* to it, even.

(But he's not.)

At least Tommy's in his apartment now, though. He's safe and curled up on the familiar feeling of carpeted flooring that makes his arms itch, he can hear the telltale sounds of street traffic even at this time of night that have always served to soothe him. To remind him he's not *completely* alone.

Slowly, Tommy gets up off the ground, his arms and legs shaking violently and threatening to make him topple over again — he grabs a hold of his front door knob and carefully locks it, letting out shaky breaths as he regains his balance.

He's okay.

He's okay.

He made it home.

He outran the fucking Bard, the third top ranking supervillain, and made it out *alive*.

(That was practically unheard of).

Tommy coughs out another sob, running his hands down his face, deciding to forget it.

To look on the better side of things.

(If there is one).

Tommy stumbles over to his sofa, all but collapsing against the rough but comforting cushions, letting out another choked noise.

*(Despite everything, he's home.)*

---

Wilbur's got a dark look on his face when he walks into the penthouse, his right hand fiddling with the beanie he'd removed the second he'd walked in, eyes clouded in thought.

"Hey, Wil," Phil calls from where he's perched on the sofa, reading a book. His wings are tucked behind his back, meaning his emerald earring must be tucked away for safekeeping.

When Wilbur doesn't make any sort of greeting, aggressively whipping his trenchcoat off to put it on a coat hanger, Phil glances up over the top of his book warily. Usually when he's this quiet after patrol, something happened.

"Wil," Phil begins cautiously, but Wilbur just shoots him a glare that makes him decide he'd better close his mouth. He hasn't seen Wilbur this deep in thought in ages.

Wilbur trudges past Phil, heading towards the hallway with a sour expression, "I'll be in my room. Tell Technoblade that I will be taking patrol tomorrow so he doesn't need to."

Phil raises an eyebrow curiously, watching Wilbur walk off with a strange aura to him before exhaling, dragging a hand down his face. He didn't even get the chance to tell him about the incident that had happened at work today.

Oh, well.

Hopefully he won't be so frustrated in the morning.

He can tell him then instead.

---

Tommy stumbles through his apartment, leaning his head against the front door. He'd changed out of his clothes from the night before (paranoia lingered on his shoulders about wearing the same thing the Bard had undoubtedly seen him in).

He was starting to worry about his lack of clothing. Not that anyone cared except those he were certain to be just Tories with nothing better to do.

Maybe he should call in sick again, Tommy thinks with his forehead still leaning against the door. He had only slept a couple hours last night, waking up around two hours early for work.

If he calls in sick for Eldritch Wings, it would still mean he'd have to go to Nook's... and honestly, at this rate, he... wouldn't really mind the company he gets at both jobs. It's nice to be around Karl and Sam.

(And occasionally the two idiots that never showed up the day before. Tommy wonders if they're alright before dismissing the thought. He has more important things to think about).

Before Tommy leaves for work, he makes sure to bring his pocket knife.

Just in case.

---

“What the hell do you mean, Tommy came into work yesterday?” Wilbur hisses tiredly from the other side of the breakfast table.

As Phil expected, the guy isn’t as angry as he was the night before. No doubt he’s still pretty agitated, but being tired got the best of him and now he’s just that type of grumpy that Phil thinks is genuinely more hilarious than it is irritating.

“He came into work yesterday,” Phil repeats with a shrug as Techno stumbles into the kitchen, eyes half closed and pink hair tousled before slumping face down onto the table. “Techno, mate, you’re gonna get your hair into the cereal.”

Techno responds, but it’s muffled. Phil stifles a chuckle.

“How can you be so nonchalant about this?” Wilbur asks incredulously, eyes narrowing at Phil. “Do you know something I don’t? Why are you so calm about this situation?”

“He seemed to be feeling better to me,” Phil responds, patting Techno on the shoulder before turning to the kettle on the stove, “Plus, uhm... I’ll have to admit, he did make me feel a bit... better. I was feeling pretty guilty about just... *leaving* him in his apartment with no recollection of what had happened.”

Wilbur seems to relax at this, but still continues to glare in Phil’s general direction through the remainder of breakfast.

(Obviously, he hasn’t gotten over his grudge that Phil hadn’t just let Tommy stay with them, or maybe he’s just still upset about whatever had happened during patrol the night before).

“Why are you two up so early, anyways?” Phil wonders suddenly, glancing at the clock which reads around forty minutes before he has to open shop. “You both usually sleep in until like eleven.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Wilbur mutters darkly.

Phil should've expected that one, really.

"Hmm," is all Techno says.

"You know we can't hear you, right?" Wilbur says sweetly, kicking his brother under the table so that the man jolts, lifting his head up to glare at Wilbur.

"Don't kick me," Techno grumbles sleepily.

*"Don't kick me,"* Wilbur mocks, grinning maliciously.

Normally, Techno would tackle Wilbur from across the table and it would end in a scuffle where Phil is plastering Wilbur's forehead, but the man just slumps back down onto the table with a huff.

Wilbur snorts, expression amused for a second before it returns to something more dark. Phil can tell he's overthinking.

"You know, mate, it might help if you just tell me what's going on," Phil supplies, sending Wilbur a supportive smile.

Wilbur shoots a dark look his way, one quite uncanny to the one he'd used the night before.

Phil, however, won't back down that easily.

"Wil, we aren't going to judge you if something went wrong on your patrol," Phil says gently, eyeing his son out the corner of his eye as he pours the now prepared tea into a mug, "If it's got you that riled up, you should probably tell us so we can help. That is what family's for, after all."

Wilbur's jaw clenches at that, but he seems a lot more content, leaning forward and exhaling. Phil takes that as a win.

"I had a witness," he mutters, running a hand through his sleep ridden curls.

Phil nods. That's not uncommon.

"I'm assuming that you're upset because you didn't take care of them?" Phil asks.

Wilbur just gives him another withering look.

"I'm going to take care of them tonight," he says, averting his eyes to the table, finger tracing some of the curves in the wood, "Tech, uh... on that note could you do me a favour?"

"No."

"Techno, *please*?"

"No."

"I'll forge you some more gold...?"

There's a pause.

"It depends on what it is," Techno says finally, shifting his head so his cheek rests against his arm on the table.

“I want you to check on Tommy today,” Wilbur says simply. Upon seeing Techno’s flat expression, he adds, “I only mean— for his second job. At Nook’s Bakery. You know the spot.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Think about it,” Wilbur muses, picking at a piece of wood on the table, looking especially smug about something, “You get a late night cup of coffee or two and the ability to annoy a gremlin child. I get to know if my little brother’s okay.”

Techno rolls his eyes, stuffing his face back into his arms.

“Fine. But I’m not coming with you to the bookstore.”

“Fine.”

Phil just shakes his head fondly.

---

Tommy is... off of his game.

He knows that he is the second he’s asked to help stock a shelf with Karl and drops nearly every book he tries to put up because of how hard his hands shake.

Karl keeps glancing at him with concern, bending down to help him pick up any book he drops and sometimes giggling when Tommy scoffs that he’d actually dropped a book — to someone who doesn’t know Tommy, they’d think it rude for Karl to laugh. Tommy, however, thinks it’s *kind*.

He hates when things get too.. real. If he can at least make Karl laugh, that's really all that matters.

Tommy exhales as he puts up another book that he'd this time dropped onto his shoe and Karl giggles a bit, cracking a joke about how he's worked there for like six months and has never been *this* shit at putting books away.

Tommy gasps — not in offense, but because Karl swore.

How dare he?

“Karl, that's not very baby of you,” Tommy says, his tone high in mockery of the people he'd seen walk into the bookstore that one time, commenting on how ‘baby’ they thought Karl was.

The man bursts into fits of laughter, covering his mouth with his sweater sleeve, “How terrible. How can I possibly be baby again, Tommy Innit?”

“You simply don't,” Tommy states proudly, crossing his arms.

Karl goes to quip but is interrupted when the bell above the front entrance jingles.

Tommy and Karl simultaneously peer around the corner of the bookshelf and Tommy feels a rush of warmth pass through him when he sees the familiar figure of Wilbur Soot enter.

Karl takes this opportunity to snort, patting Tommy on the shoulder before returning to stocking the books.



“Wilbur fucking Soot,” Tommy says, crossing his arms when the man finally lays eyes on him. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes.

Maybe it’s just because of how *exhausted* he is, but Tommy swears that Wilbur’s a little... off today.

(Then again, maybe he is too).

“Hey, Tommy,” Wilbur says, his tone warm as ever when he reaches out to ruffle Tommy’s hair, the kid swatting at his hand a little more half-heartedly than usual. “Feeling better?”

Tommy frowns.

Did Wilbur know about that somehow?

“What do you mean?” he asks suspiciously.

“I asked Phil where you were a couple days ago,” Wilbur hums, gazing around the bookstore as if looking for someone that wasn’t there, “He said you called in sick.”

Oh.

“Ah, yeah, just a bit of a head cold, you know how it is,” Tommy says, rubbing the back of his neck. He’s glad that Karl had made him feel a bit better before Wilbur came. He... really wouldn’t enjoy it if Wilbur saw him... breakdown or anything.

Wilbur smiles at him, “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Toms.”

Tommy just nods.

*If only he knew.*

Tommy resorts back to his spot behind the counter (Karl had given him a wave when he'd tried to return to stocking books with him that basically said *I'm fine go sit down idiot*). Wilbur follows close behind, as he always does, leaning against the counter.

"Are you sure you're feeling well, Tommy?" Wilbur asks, now frowning.

"Fuck kinda question is that? I already said I was feeling better, prick," Tommy mutters, slumping down to put his chin in his hand.

Wilbur watches him carefully, as though he doesn't believe him, before he sighs, relenting.

"If you say so, Toms."

There's an awkward pause.

Tommy takes this opportunity to change the subject.

"So where's your weird brother?" he asks.

Wilbur snorts.

"I pissed him off this morning so he didn't come today."

“What? Fuck did you do?” Tommy asks, interest piqued. Wilbur’s brother seemed like the kinda guy you didn’t want to mess with literally ever.

(Tommy could take him though. Probably).

Wilbur, though, just shrugs, something glinting smug in his eye, “I kicked him.”

Tommy barks out a laugh, “You *what*? You kicked that mofo?”

Wilbur grins now, looking a bit more relaxed than he had before. It makes Tommy’s shoulders feel slightly less... tense.

“I did,” Wilbur says proudly. “Right in the shins, too.”

Tommy sucks in a breath through his teeth.

“Damn, Wilbur, you really told him,” Tommy jokes, Wilbur rolling his eyes and reaching out to punch him teasingly in the arm.

“Shut up, gremlin.”

“Say, Wil?” Tommy hums, looking at the man, who now meets his eyes. “Do you want to go to the park at some point to bully children?”

Wilbur raises an eyebrow.

“You... want to go to a park... to bully children?” Wilbur repeats slowly.

“Yes.”

Wilbur stares at him for a moment before responding,

“I’m in. When do we go?”

“Give me a time and date and I’ll be there,” Tommy responds.

Wilbur smiles in return, but it fades a little.

“I *would* say today, but... I’m a bit busy for the remainder of the day.”

Tommy’s face falls a little.

“That’s alright, big man,” he reassures, reaching out to pat Wilbur’s shoulder. “We can always postpone for some other time.”

Wilbur gives him a genuine look, something warm and ... whatever that emotion is that Tommy can’t quite name.

“Thanks, Toms.”

---

Tommy all but falls apart when he walks into Nook’s later and Fran is there to greet him in the back room, running circles around his feet and even jumping up to lick his face when he bends down to scratch behind her ears.

“Quit licking me, you weirdo,” Tommy says, trying to put on a disgusted tone even as he laughs every time the dog licks his face again.

“She missed you,” Sam says from where he sits on the other side of the room, looking over paperwork.

Probably taxes, Tommy realizes. Classic old man shit. Him and Phil would probably get along well.

“Of course she did,” Tommy responds despite the way he feels a burning in his eyes. Just a little.

(Even if it was just Fran, a dog, who missed him, at least it was someone. Or *something*).

Sam hums, glancing up from his paperwork as Tommy stands up straight, trying to step over Fran as he prepares for his second job.

“You feeling alright, kiddo?” Sam asks, and Tommy doesn’t even dare glance the man’s way because he knows if he even sees an *ounce* of sympathy (or care) in Sam’s expression, he just might break.

“Yep! I’m at the peak of my health, Sam, do not worry for me,” Tommy responds with his back turned, putting on a faux enthusiastic tone before heading out into the café.

Just a couple more hours to go and then he can go home. Just a few more hours.

---

“Why are you here?” Tommy asks in irritation, glaring at Wilbur’s recognizable twin, who looks just as much like he doesn’t want to be here as Tommy feels.

“Just want a coffee,” Techno says simply.

“It— what the fuck is wrong with you and your brother?” Tommy whispers in disgust. “It’s fucking twelve in the morning. What the hell do you need *caffeine* for?”

“Sleep is for the weak.”

Tommy’s eyes narrow.

Fair, but...

Also stupid.

“I’ve decided I do not like you.” Tommy states.

Techno huffs.

“Wilbur was right, this *is* shit customer service.”

“Your face is shit customer service,” Tommy quips. He has the best comebacks. Then he frowns and adds, “Speaking of that emo fuck, where is he?”

“Out,” is all Techno says.

“Wow. So descriptive,” Tommy mutters.

“I’ll tell him you missed him, if you want,” Tecno says, the corner of his lip twitching.

“You’re evil and I hate you,” Tommy decides, “I don’t fucking miss that bitch. I hate him. I want him gone and six feet under. Him and his stupid fucking glasses and plain *black coffee*.”

“Hmm, alright,” Techno hums patiently. “Whatever you say, kid.”

Tommy has decided that he is going to poison his coffee.

“Hey kid, I’ll kick Wilbur when I get home if you let me buy you a hot chocolate,” Techno says once Tommy’s turned to begin brewing his coffee.

...

Tommy has decided that he is *not* going to poison his coffee.

---

“So,” Techno hums from the other side of the booth, staring with a rather intimidating expression at Tommy that makes the kid cross his arms uncomfortably, “How ya feelin’?”

The fuck?

Why do people keep asking him that?

“What the hell? I’m fucking *fine*, ” Tommy seethes, and Techno’s eyebrow raises curiously as the kid seems to go on a full blown rant, “People keep asking me that today and it’s gotten on my *fuckin’* nerves. I swear, if one more person asks me how I’m feeling with that patronizing tone, I will start stabbing shit.”

Techno huffs in amusement.

“You’ll start stabbing shit?” he repeats.

“Yes, ” Tommy emphasizes aggressively, eyes blazing, “It’s so fucking *obnoxious*. I’m not a god damn charity case.”

“You’re right, you’re not,” Techno responds, taking a sip of his coffee. He had put a couple sugars in it, much to Tommy’s delight (and agitation— why hadn’t he just *ordered* it that way?)

Tommy slumps in the booth, arms crossed as he gazes out the window. Techno’s glad that Sam had agreed to letting Tommy have a small break to drink hot chocolate — if he’s being honest, the kid looks about ready to fall apart right in front of him.

It’s.... concerning.

But he shouldn’t press for information. Not like Wilbur does. It’s none of his business what Tommy’s going through — if he wants to tell him, he will.

(Wilbur just happens to be a protective and rather possessive bastard when it comes to people he considers family. Techno learned that the hard way).

They sit there for a while, Tommy’s head now slumped against the bakery window, the rest of Nook’s empty at this time of night, Techno sitting normally opposite of Tommy, now scrolling through his phone.



“Techno...?” Tommy begins, almost warily.

“Hmm?”

“Is... Wilbur... still busy or anything?”

“He is,” Techno hums, but now he’s intrigued. “Why?”

Tommy shrugs, “Just, uh... was wondering if he’d be free to walk me home or something. It’s not a big deal, I can definitely walk *myself* home, I’m a big man and all, it’s nothing like that, I could just use...”

“The company?” Techno supplies, despite the way he has an inkling that it has to be more than that. With the way Tommy’s shoulders have slumped forwards, his eyes darker than usual...

Techno has no choice, really.

He sighs.

Maybe he is becoming soft.

“I’ll walk you home tonight, if you’d like?”

Tommy looks up at him immediately, eyes wide.

“For real?” he says, sounding almost relieved, before he clears his throat, “I mean— thanks. Thank you. I could uh... use some refreshing on some old wars, anyways. Bitch.”

For the first time in a while, Techno smiles.

## Chapter End Notes

tommy: i don't like family. i'm my own parent

also tommy: if sam even looks at me like he cares i will fucking cry. i will scream and break down. i will lose my shit.

anyways we got o!crimeboys for 30 seconds today and i took those crumbs and fucking *ran*.

fun fact, my google doc almost crashed writing this bc of the fucking word count. what do i do man /srs

on that note, apologies if this chapter's shit cuz,,, guys. lmao. guys. i wrote *three* fics today. what the hell.

am i speed or am i insane?

who knows.

help. lmao

# your mood swings give me whiplash

## Chapter Summary

“What is it, Tommy?”

The boy clears his throat a bit and then mumbles, as though embarrassed, “The real reason I uh... wanted company tonight is because I got...” Tommy trails off for a second.

Techno’s gaze hardens.

“Did you get jumped?” Techno says, feeling a curl of guilt when Tommy flinches at how venomous the man’s tone is.

Tommy recoils a little, eyes flicking across the ground, before nodding slowly.

or, another (slightly) filler chapter a bunch of bedrock bros content (techno is going soft), wilbur takes a trip to the pet store, & just. overall softness. (maybe)

## Chapter Notes

when u manfail so now you must manipulate

---

**TWs:** talk of getting jumped/robbed, slight derealization, possessive behaviour (ITS ALL PLATONIC, do not be fucking weirdchamp!), talk about murd3r & d3ath, talk of uh. stabbing n shit, (pls lmk if i missed any, tyty<3)

It's nice tonight, Techno thinks.

A little on the colder side than it has been recently, but Techno prefers it.

You'd half expect someone who's a Piglin hybrid to prefer the warmer weather, but since he already runs at a hotter temperature than normal, he actually prefers quite the opposite.

It's a strange phenomenon, and one that Wilbur enjoys making fun of him for often.

As he walks down the sidewalk and through the alleyways in the direction of Tommy's apartment complex, he just *talks*.

He isn't used to speaking this much, but ever since they left the café, Tommy's been practically interrogating him about all the Greek mythology facts he knows (only because he made one simple joke about the myth of Arachne).

Honestly, Techno half expected for *Tommy* to be the one talking through this entire trip (which is why he was so hesitant at first upon joining), but it was genuinely the opposite.

In fact, Techno was shocked at how incredibly quiet the kid was.

(Every now and then when he'd glance Tommy's way, who he'd learned was a great listener when it came to things he actually cared about, sometimes Tommy would be glancing around the corners of alleyways, or tapping his fingers against his pant leg in a synchronized motion that Techno recognized too well).

Techno's suspicions were confirmed when they had to turn down a rather small and dark alleyway in order to get to the next street over and Tommy had all but pressed himself against Techno's side, eyes wide like a deer's while he looked around, flinching at every noise.

Despite the questions that threatened to overflow, Techno kept quiet about it for a while, continuing his retelling of the myth of Perseus until they were out of the alleyway and back out into the open night, streetlights and stars guiding their way.

“So,” Techno hums a bit after finishing Perseus’s myth, glancing to his right where Tommy walks almost sheepishly beside him, hands shoved into his pants pockets, “You gonna tell me the real reason that you wanted company to walk you home?”

Tommy tenses a bit, his head tipping down in a way that makes his blonde and red tipped curls kind of fall into his eyes, almost kind of embarrassed at the question.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Techno quickly reassures despite the lingering want to know why Tommy had looked so relieved when Techno had told him that he’d be willing to walk him home.

“No, it’s just...” Tommy chuckles nervously, doing that thing where he rubs the back of his neck, glancing over at Techno, as though vaguely skeptical, “How did you know that there was a real reason than the one I told you?”

Techno raises an eyebrow and quirks a little bit of a smile.

“When you live with someone like Wilbur for long enough, it becomes easier to recognize certain human functions,” Techno explains, looking up at the stars above their heads, absentmindedly naming each constellation he’d memorized one night when he was bored.

(It helps him to talk about things more if he focuses on something other than acknowledging another person’s presence).

Tommy laughs a little at Techno’s comment though, snorting a, “Understandable” before Techno continues,

“It also helps if you aren’t, uh, exactly a *social person* yourself. It makes it easier to... read people if that’s what you do your whole life instead of genuinely speaking to them.”

Tommy looks at him for a moment before he nods in agreement, humming a little.

Techno hasn’t really told anyone this before — Wilbur, of course, being his brother grew up with that as just general knowledge, along with Phil, but Tommy’s the first person that Techno’s actually admitting this kind of thing to.

Huh.

He ignores the comment Wilbur had made before Techno had left to visit Tommy’s café about him being secretly *a big softie*.

Gross.

“So what you’re saying is that you’re just a loser,” Tommy grins jokingly at the man, jolting Techno out of his thoughts.

The man rolls his eyes and punches Tommy lightly in the shoulder.

No, he’s not growing soft for this actual *child*. It was Wilbur’s thing to get attached, not his.

(Unless it was gold. That was something else entirely).

“That’s real nice comin’ from a gremlin like you,” Techno drawls in response.

“What the hell,” Tommy bristles, tugging at his sweater sleeve, “Go back to explaining Greek mythology or something, holy shit. This is- you are just *attacking* me now.”

Techno smirks, “I’ve already told you the short and pretty tragic tale of Perseus, and the one about Arachne. What more do you want to hear?”

“Hello? Everything, obviously.”

“Everything? Tommy, that would quite literally take *forever*.”

Tommy grins suspiciously, “Guess you’ll just have to swing by the bookstore more often and tell me about it, dickhead.”

Techno rolls his eyes, dragging a hand down his face.

A part of him is starting to regret walking Tommy home more and more.

“I’m not coming to the bookstore if I don’t absolutely *have* to, nerd.”

Tommy puts on an almost pouting look and Techno averts his eyes. He knows from what Wilbur’s told him that trying to look away from Tommy’s puppy dog eyes is quite literally futile.

“No, no, *nope*. I’m not falling for that, so don’t even try it, kid,” Techno drawls, staring dead ahead, even when Tommy relentlessly begins tugging on his shirt sleeve.

“Pleeeeaaseeee?” Tommy pleads, even going as far as to lilt his voice.

“No, holy shit, Tommy, why can’t you just read one of the books about mythology yourself?”

Tommy's quiet for a second, and it clicks.

"You uh... can't read, can you?" Techno wonders, suddenly feeling a bit guilty. He glances down at Tommy curiously, who is glaring at the ground, tugging on the hem of his jumper a bit more.

"Reading's for- for *pussies*," Tommy grumbles in frustration. "I do the *manly* thing and listen to audiobooks. That makes me so much cooler than you."

Techno snorts, rolling his eyes again (man, at this rate he's going to get them stuck like that), looking away from Tommy again.

"Well, I'm *still* not gonna read to you. Go download an audiobook or something for it."

Tommy stops walking altogether at this comment, making a sad noise in his throat. Techno pauses as well and...

He tries glancing down at Tommy for just a single *millisecond* and— and he just *sighs*.

*He is going soft, isn't he? He's going soft for this fucking gremlin that has got Wilbur wrapped around his bandaged finger, for the one that he just so happens to have a blood debt with as his supervillain counterpart.*

*Fucking hell.*

*(He decides to blame Wilbur for this inconvenience, as per usual).*

*"Fine, fine. Alright. If you find a way to get me away from all those people in your dumb bookstore, I'll come read to you, kid." Techno says, sounding defeated.*



*Tommy immediately lights up, grinning so widely you'd think that the entire street would be blinded by it.*

*"Gee, thanks, king!" he says enthusiastically, dropping his tone down a little, a suspicious smirk of victory on his face.*

*Techno snorts and reaches out, ruffling the kid's hair a little.*

*"No problem, Toms."*

---

*Wilbur has looked everywhere.*

*He's searched every alleyway, every train cart that he could possibly break into, every dumpster bin and every rooftop that he has seen in a mile radius of where that guy had last been.*

*And there's still no sign of them.*

*Exhaling in frustration, Wilbur runs his hands through his hair, wondering how detrimental it would be to just take his anger out on some random, completely unexpected hero.*

*But... no. He really shouldn't do that.*

*He isn't a bad person — none of the Syndicate are.*

*(At least, that's what Phil says).*

*Wilbur likes to think of himself as a good person occasionally, but he knows somewhere deep down that in reality, he... he is kind of a shitty human being.*

*Kicking a rock aggressively against one of the walls, Wilbur decides to just call it a night.*

*If the person he saw was smart - which they pretty much proved to be with how quickly they navigated the city, as though they were a villain just like he was - then they wouldn't come out at night for a long time.*

*Seething (and just a little bit impressed even if he'd never admit it), Wilbur pulls his phone out and calls up Techno.*

---

*"Here we are," Tommy motions with a great gesture to his front door and Techno raises an eyebrow at the apartment they'd just arrived in front of.*

*"This is where you live?" Techno drawls, (having to put emphasis so that Tommy has no clue he's been here multiple times).*

*Tommy bristles immediately, glaring at Techno as though he'd just kicked Tommy's dog or something.*

*"Fuck is that supposed to mean?! My apartment is fucking poggers, bro, don't even try that-that fucking privileged ass stuff on me!" Tommy splutters.*

*"Privileged?" Techno repeats, aghast. "What makes you say that?"*

*Tommy deadpans him, pointing at his own ear and then motioning with both hands to Techno's arms, which are covered in golden bangles.*

*Oh, Techno thinks. Right.*

*"You dress like a fucking pirate who just found his most valuable treasure," Tommy continues with a rather flat tone, a glint of irritation in his eyes. It kinda feels like he's had this bottled up for a while now. "And not to mention, your stupid twin brother dresses like a fucking— a fucking vampire that writes emo poetry or something!"*

*Techno lets out a bark of a laugh— oh, if only Tommy knew.*

*"I guess you're right, when you put it that way," Techno hums with a shake of his head, putting his hands into his pants pockets.*

*Tommy shifts a bit uncomfortably on the doorstep to his apartment suddenly, and Techno frowns.*

*There's a slight pause, and the wind whistles past, blowing Tommy's curls slightly out of his eyes.*

*"Uhm... Techno," Tommy begins carefully, and now he really won't make eye contact, "If I tell you something... can you uh... promise me you won't tell anyone else?"*

*Now that's intriguing.*

*"Of course," Techno surprises even himself when he says this almost immediately.*

*He rarely makes promises for anything — one part of his moral code as a super villain is that he never breaks promises. He considers it to be both immoral and offensive, so he hates making promises (especially ones he knows he can't keep).*

*But...*

*With the way Tommy has been acting all night, hands wringing uncomfortably in front of him, his irrational inability to make eye contact (although that has been a characteristic of Tommy's that Techno's noticed for a while), has been all... concerning, really.*

*Not even to mention the dark circles beneath Tommy's eyes or the way his hands will start shaking out of nowhere or his incredibly poor posture that Wilbur seemed to frown at the entirety of Tommy's stay at their penthouse (and at the bookstore beforehand).*

*"What is it, Tommy?"*

*The boy clears his throat a bit and then mumbles, as though embarrassed, "The real reason I uh... wanted company tonight is because I got..." Tommy trails off for a second.*

*Techno's gaze hardens.*

*"Did you get jumped?" Techno says, feeling a curl of guilt when Tommy flinches at how venomous the man's tone is.*

*Tommy recoils a little, eyes flicking across the ground, before nodding slowly.*

*Techno huffs, "Don't be scared, kid, I'm not gonna make fun of you if that's what you're worried about... but... is the violence thing... normal in this district for you?"*

*Tommy rolls his sleeve up a little and begins to fiddle with a bracelet that dangles from his wrist. (It's a silver thing with a red gemstone that has a design on it of some sorts, one Techno can't make out in this lighting and one he hadn't noticed before due to the amount of times Tommy wears long sleeves).*

*“Not really,” Tommy mumbles, “It... you know how it is, big man, it comes and goes.”*

*Then he clears his throat and glances up, rolling his shoulders a little as if trying to regain his persona of acting stronger than usual, “But it’s not a big deal so don’t- don’t look at me like that, it’s not, really- alright? Don’t fucking tell anyone, either, or I might have to cut your limbs off.”*

*Techno relaxes at Tommy’s joke a tad, snorting, “Alright, alright— I won’t tell anyone,” then, his gaze softens a bit, “I did promise, didn’t I?”*

*Tommy grimaces a little, something dark on his face, “Not everyone keeps their promises, king.”*

*“Well I do, uh...” Techno blinks, then grimaces a little, before emphasizing, “... king.”*

*Tommy bursts into laughter, the kind that Wilbur’s described sends everyone around him into a fit of laughter too because of how incredibly happy he sounds.*

*(Techno’s surprised at how right he is).*

*“Well, I’m gonna go now,” Tommy motions with his head towards his apartment, a small smile on his face, “Uh... thanks for the chat, Techno.”*

*“Anytime, Tommy. Goodnight.”*

*Tommy rolls his eyes and walks into his apartment, shutting the door right into Techno’s face.*

*What else did he expect, really?*

*Techno begins to head out in the direction of the Underground - really, it's obnoxious taking the train but Wilbur had borrowed his car for patrol so he had to walk to the café - when his cell rings.*

*Speak of the fucking devil.*

*"Hey, Wil," Techno says into the phone, walking down the sidewalk towards the Underground. "How's patrol goin'?"*

*Wilbur growls on the other side of the phone and Techno snickers a little. Clearly, his brother was still having... issues... capturing that witness of his.*

*It's gonna be hilarious making fun of him for that when he gets home later.*

*"Just tell me how it was at the café," Wilbur grumbles into the phone angrily.*

*Techno can hear the sounds of a car starting up... it sounds familiar and an idea clicks in his mind.*

*"Wow, no asking how I'm doing?" Techno jokes.*

*"Fuck off."*

*"Fine, alright," Techno hums a little, "I'll tell you if you come and pick me up in my car."*

*Wilbur groans.*

*"But you're on the other side of the city, asshole," the man whines.*

*“I’ll go with you to the pet store on the way home.”*

*There’s a pause.*

*“I’m on my way.”*

---

*“So, how was my special little brother, since you keep avoiding the question?” Wilbur asks the second Techno slides into the passenger seat of the car, the man shooting him a flat look.*

*“You just don’t care about me anymore, huh?” Techno says, raising an eyebrow.*

*“Nope,” Wilbur says cheerily, flashing a smile that’s all sharp teeth, “Not in the slightest.”*

*“Wil, dude, do you have your necklace on?”*

*Wilbur blinks and then mumbles an “oh, right”, pulling down the glove compartment and pulling out the necklace with a green emerald attached, tossing it on and tucking it into his shirt.*

*His pointed ears shrink and when he turns to grin at Techno, his teeth are back to normal.*

*“Better?”*

*“Mhm.”*

*“Great!” Wilbur pats the steering wheel of the car, “Now tell me about how Tommy was.”*

*“You’re such a possessive bastard,” Techno grumbles, leaning back in his seat, “Tommy was fine, though. I walked him home.”*

*“Oh? Why?” Wilbur chuckles, “Did you have to force him to walk with you or something? Wish you’d gotten that on video. He was probably cursing you out and shit.”*

*Techno pauses.*

*“No, uh... he asked.”*

*Wilbur’s silent for a second, expression darkening, “He asked you to walk him home?”*

*“Yep.”*

*“... Did he say why?”*

*The promise Techno had made replays in his head and he hums lowly.*

*“He did, but I made a promise not to say anything,” he admits.*

*“What the hell? I’m your brother!”*

*“With the direction things seem to be going, Tommy’s just as much my brother as you are at this point,” Techno grumbles in irritation, deciding to ignore the soft ‘aww’ that Wilbur makes.*



*“You are going soft, I fucking knew you would,” Wilbur grins at him before turning back to looking at the road, swerving around a car that he deems to be ‘going to slow for him’, “But really, Techno, since you’re all caring now, this means you should tell me what he said.”*

*Techno shoots him a withering look, “I made a promise, Wil. I’m not breaking it just because you want to go on a ridiculous and anger-fueled hunting spree.”*

*Wilbur seethes for a minute, swerving the car into a lot so hard that he sends Techno flying into the car door.*

*“Fucking— fine,” Wilbur parks the car into the lot aggressively, turning to Techno with a flaming irritation in his eyes, who is still trying to recover from being thrown into the door (and rethinking his life choices of getting into the same car as Wilbur), “But you’re coming inside with me at the pet store, you’re not just sitting in the fucking car like a loser.”*

*“Do you want to see me suffer or something?”*

*“Get out of the fucking car.”*

---

*The second they walk into the pet store, it’s as though Wilbur’s emotions have just switched entirely.*

*The man immediately runs over to the ‘cats & kittens’ part of the store, cooing and awwing at the cats that come up to the window when he puts his hand against it, each one reaching out to paw at the glass.*

*He looks ready to burst into tears by the time Techno catches up to him, expression blank.*

*(Wilbur does this more than twice a month).*

*“Techno, Techno, look—” Wilbur points at a particular ginger cat that has rolled upside down onto its back, “Look at him. He’s so cute, I need him immediately.”*

*“Wil, we can’t get a cat,” Techno says, his tone full of someone who really is starting to wish they’d just walked home and gotten on the train instead.*

*“But look at him—” Wilbur whines, poking the glass, the ginger cat rolling around on its back some more, even opening its mouth and letting out a rather muffled mew.*

*“Wil, Phil’s allergic to cats,” Techno reminds his brother, pulling Wilbur away from the cats portion of the store while the man makes low noises of frustration, much like a child who didn’t get that toy he wanted at a market would.*

*“Fine, fine,” Wilbur grumbles, navigating to the fish section with his arm still attached to Techno, there by dragging him right along with him, “Then we will get something that will not kill Phil a couple years earlier than his natural death as an elderly. We will get a fish!”*

*“Do we have to get a pet?” Techno exhales, looking at the numerous multicoloured fish lined on the walls in different fish tanks. He rubs the spot between his eyes with his fingers, trying to coax an oncoming headache.*

*He already had to deal with the child, and now this.*

*“Yes, absolutely we do,” Wilbur says immediately, eyeing a particular goldfish before turning to a betta, “We just have to find the perfect one for Phil—”*

*“Hello,” a nervous voice says behind them, the two whirling around to eye a rather tall kid with a mask on and brown and blonde... split dyed hair?*

*(They've also got vitiligo, which is very cool).*

*"Do you need help with finding something?" the employee - Ranboo, Techno reads on his name tag - asks.*

*They wring their hands together anxiously, glancing over their shoulder behind the counter, as if looking for someone.*

*"Yes, actually," Wilbur says, eyeing the kid with a frown (he's not used to being towered over by anyone other than Techno), "I am in dire need of a good fish that won't cause suffering to those who are allergic to cats."*

*Ranboo blinks, tilting his head, eyebrows pulling together, "I- I'm sorry, you're what?"*

*"He just wants a cool looking fish," Techno says before Wilbur can start talking again and Ranboo nods quickly.*

*"Oh, okay... okay. I can, uhm, I can do that," he says, turning to examine the fish tanks on the wall before motioning at one in particular, "We have a lot of uhm... koi fish, if you'd like something cool like that."*

*Wilbur hums, looking at the fish before shaking his head.*

*"I'll come back to these maybe," he says, before turning with an ominous look on his face, "But do you have something perhaps more... cute?"*

*Ranboo frowns a little, thinking, before snapping his fingers, his eyes lighting up a bit.*

*"Actually, you know what," the man walks off towards another shelf that holds a variety of tanks, "I think I have just the thing."*

---

*“I can’t believe you right now,” Techno murmurs as he and Wilbur walk out of the pet store, both of their arms full — Techno carries two large fish tanks and Wilbur a betta fish in one hand and a fucking yellow and orange axolotl in the other.*

*“I wonder where Tubbo was tonight,” Wilbur just hums, clearly changing the subject from the real reasoning why he’d bought that axolotl.*

*Techno rolls his eyes.*

*He seriously can’t catch a break tonight, can he?*

*“Probably out on patrol or something,” Techno just says, clearly unbothered by the fact Tubbo wasn’t behind the counter at the pet store as he usually was, “Ranboo seemed like a good kid to me. He helped you find...”*

*Techno glances at the axolotl again.*

*“... that.”*

*Wilbur just shrugs, opening the back seat of the car so that Techno can carefully set both tanks on the floorboard where they won’t crack.*

*“Yeah, but... I wanted to see how his beehives are doing,” Wilbur says, slinking into the passenger seat (after Techno had shot him a harsh glare when he’d tried to drive again).*

*“The world doesn’t revolve around you, Wil.”*

*Wilbur huffs, “Keep talking like that and I’ll start calling you Philza 2.0.”*

*“How terrible that would be.”*

*Wilbur smacks his arm.*

---

*Tommy sits on his sofa, his knees pulled to his chest as he gazes out his (still) broken window at the city lights, a cold breeze blowing in every now and then.*

*It’s nearing wintertime, Tommy realizes with a start and a slight grimace. He fucking hates winter. He isn’t really ready for summertime to end, no matter how much he melts out in the sunlight due to the amount of sweaters he puts on.*

*He grumbles a little under his breath but... it’s not quite winter yet.*

*He still has time to possibly go shopping for some more sweaters... maybe even some more work clothes if he has the money after rent... (maybe even a part time job for the weekends if he needs it, which he definitely will).*

*Tommy’s phone buzzes suddenly, interrupting his train of thought, and he frowns down at the contact name above the message.*

*His blood runs cold for a couple seconds and he does his best to keep his hand steady as he swipes the message to the right to properly read it.*

***Quackity:*** *hey tommy. i’m busy this weekend so we will have to postpone your visit until next weekend. sorry about that. looking forward to seeing you though!*

:] -Q

*Tommy breathes a sigh of relief, running a hand through his hair and laughing a little to himself.*

*Maybe today wasn't so bad after all.*

## Chapter End Notes

wilbur: \*angrily kicking shit because he can't find his witness\*

also wilbur, ten minutes later: i'm gonna get this axolotl for my little brother who doesn't know he's my little brother yet :D

coughs ... you guys catch that thing abt the emeralds?

aha winky emoji...

also quick little thing... ao3 fucked up the layout for this fic for some reason so from the part where wilbur calls techno & down, there's a lot of things that r mean to be italicized but r just. not.

i blame it on posting this whole fic on my phone lmao.

**obligatory 'author rants in notes' below (warning, my brain goes in a million directions at once):**

hey fellas,  
apologies for the short chapter !!

i was gonna postpone this chapter until i added more to it but then tommy streamed and we got crimeboys so... i am posting this in celebration because i speedwrote this the second wilbur soot ended his stream.

anyways... o!tommy has never done anything wrong ever and i will protect him with my life.

guys holy shit??? 21k hits??? ? ty guys so much pls- <3 i'm gonna cry /pos

also also, lmao i thought abt making a twitter just for the sake of updates (& to cry abt origins/dream smp) but i am terrified of the bird app smh.

i'm tempted, though.

(apologies if next chapter isnt out for a hot minute, my brain is \*fried\* lmao)

# my emotional support axolotl

## Chapter Summary

“Well, since you kicked me out last time I visited because I came in through the window,” The Blade begins with a drawl, “I figured I would come in what you called the ‘normal’ way and at a pretty normal time.”

*Normal time, my ass*, Tommy thinks to himself as he bitterly glances at the time over the oven which reads 1:03 am. At least it’s a bit better than four, though.

or, the blade & tommy finally have their first training session, crimeboys content bc theyre my favourites, & techno slowly puts some pieces together (:

## Chapter Notes

to the user who bookmarked this fic and said they’d eat it if they didn’t get crimeboys, this ones for u <3 /pos

---

**TWs:** possessive behaviour (it is all platonic!! do not be weirdchamp pls), mentions of scars / bruising / implied child abuse, character has a panic attack, derealization (stay safe & lmk if i missed any<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy stares blankly at the fish tank Wilbur has set down in front of him, a yellow and orange axolotl swimming around excitedly in it, opening its mouth a little in a gape when Tommy puts his finger against the glass.

“So?” Wilbur asks, anxiously leaning against the counter, not liking the way Tommy’s just been completely silent the entire time, staring wide-eyed at the axolotl, “What uh... what do you think?”



Tommy blinks, almost as though he's coming out of a dream-like state, and looks up at Wilbur.

"Huh?" he says and Wilbur snorts.

"I asked you what you thought about your axolotl, Toms," Wilbur repeats with a gentle smile, albeit a bit strained.

Wilbur had been pretty anxious about giving the axolotl to Tommy in the hopes that the kid would like it.

He had specifically chosen this one for him, after all (what with the golden speckles across it and the way it so closely resembled the boy with its blank stare).

Tommy blinks again, looking from Wilbur to the axolotl, then back again, and then his eyes widen a fraction when he sees the axolotl once more, as if viewing it in an entirely new light.

"Wait, wait," he begins, his voice soft and lilted, like a kid who just got offered a free ice cream, "You... wait. This axolotl is... you... you bought me an *axolotl*?"

(Normally this interaction would send Wilbur into a fit of laughter because it just goes to show how incredibly strange Tommy is when it comes to accepting gifts, as concerning as that may be, but...)

Wilbur just nods meekly and Tommy positively beams. Wilbur is vaguely reminded of the sunshine that had peered in through the blinds of his windows earlier that morning and an overwhelming feeling of fondness rushes over him.

"What the fuck, Wil?" Tommy squeaks, leaning down to examine the axolotl once more, the most genuine smile on his face, one that shows off a dimple in his right cheek, "You— why

— are you being serious with me right now? Is this a joke?”

“No, of course it isn’t,” Wilbur responds, now frowning a little at the thought of playing a joke like that. “Why would I joke about this?”

Tommy shrugs nonchalantly, “I dunno, just— wow, man. You fucking bought me an axolotl. I’m... holy shit, Wil.”

Then something must click, because Tommy’s smile fades and is replaced with horror and the boy rounds on Wilbur, “Oh— wait, shit, do you want me to pay you back or something? I, uh...”

Tommy trails off, quickly taking his (rather thin) wallet out of his back pocket and rifling through it, looking rather crestfallen when he looks up at Wilbur again, “I don’t really have the money to pay you back right now, but if I—”

“Tommy, Tommy,” Wilbur interrupts, and now he really can’t hide the concern in his voice, “Toms, I *don’t* want you to pay me back, man. It’s a gift.”

Tommy blinks at this, as if hearing the word for the first time.

“You...” Tommy frowns, mulling his choice of words over. “You don’t want reimbursement?”

“No, Tommy,” Wilbur rolls his eyes fondly, leaning against the counter again, his chin propped up on his hand, “I don’t want or *need* reimbursement.”

Wilbur then appears to remember something because he snorts and adds, “You made that last part pretty much apparent when you laid in what you really thought about rich people last night to Techno.”

A chill runs down Tommy's back and he grimaces, flushing a tad, "He told you about that?"

"Yeah, I asked him where he'd been and he told me that he walked you home and that you made fun of him for looking like a rich pirate," Wilbur's grin is smug, "*Genius*, I tell you. You hit the nail right on the head with that one. I've been trying to tell him for *years* that his fashion sense was so weird..."

Tommy relaxes a little and then decides that he might as well destroy Wilbur's ego now that he no longer feels like someone doused him in ice.

"Did he tell you what I'd said about you?" Tommy asks, making his tone all blasé, pretending to be distracted by his new best friend and son, the axolotl.

He doesn't miss the pride he feels when Wilbur's face falls a tad, the man's eyebrows furrowing.

"No?? What— what the fuck did you say about *me*?" the man splutters, poking Tommy in the head so that he can have his full attention again.

"I said that you dressed like a nineteenth century vampire that wrote emo poetry and got no women," Tommy responds with a sharp smirk, slapping Wilbur's hand away that had gone to poke him again.

Wilbur's face falls flat but there's something that glints with amusement in his eye.

"You fucking *child*—" he seethes, trying to grab Tommy from the other side of the front counter but failing when Tommy pushes his roller chair backwards, a smirk on his face.

"Be careful, Wil, you might hurt my axolotl and then I'll have to sue you."

Wilbur glares at him, “I’ll just take your dumb fish back to the pet store and ask for a refund.”

Tommy gasps because clearly, this is definitely crossing a line.

“You wouldn’t do that,” Tommy whispers.

Wilbur grins.

“I definitely would.”

Tommy’s eyes narrow, “It’d be awfully rude for you to do that just because I made a properly correct statement about the way you dress, prick.”

“I don’t— I don’t fucking dress like a guy who doesn’t get women!” Wilbur seethes, leaning across the desk again with a sharp glare.

“Sounds like you’re in denial again. You’re backpedaling your grief stages, Wil, that isn’t good for your health.”

“Where are you even *getting* this information?” Wilbur whispers incredulously, one of his eyes twitching when Tommy grins widely.

“Audiobooks.”

---

“So, what did you name your axolotl?” Wilbur asks as he walks Tommy home that night (having shown up totally “accidentally” at Nook’s for a cup of black coffee, waiting

practically the whole night for Tommy to shuffle over and sheepishly ask him to walk him home).

Tommy shifts the large tank in his arms that he'd had to keep in the back of Nook's while he worked (Sam had an especially fun time observing the axolotl and Fran had nearly knocked the thing off the counter if Tommy hadn't caught it immediately).

"Not sure yet," Tommy says simply, "I was thinking back to when we were talking about weird poets and vampires and victorian era shit to try and name it but I can't think of anything so I just might go to Plan B."

Wilbur isn't sure he wants to hear what *Plan B* is but he asks anyway.

(As he expected, he didn't want to know).

"Plan B is to just name him Piss Boy," Tommy says with a grin that reads *I'm definitely gonna use that one*.

Wilbur runs a hand through his hair, exhaling.

Is this how Phil feels on a daily occasion? As though he's going to rip his hair out and grow grey hairs thirty years early? He might just start feeling bad for the guy.

"Please do not name the axolotl I bought you fuckin' *Piss Boy*," Wilbur whines tiredly.

"You can't tell me what to do, prick."

"Consider it my reimbursement then," Wilbur pleads, "Instead of paying me, you just do me this amazing of favour of not naming your axolotl that, holy shit."

Tommy rolls his eyes.

“Fucking fine, *jee-zus*. You’re so dramatic. I’ll probably just name it Oswald or something then,” Tommy’s eyes light up as he pieces something together, “Like- like that cool poggers woman from *Doctor Who*.”

Wilbur snorts, “You’ve seen that show?”

“Obviously? I’d be a wrong’un if I hadn’t, wouldn’t I?”

Wilbur clicks his tongue, smirking, “Techno hasn’t seen it.”

Tommy gasps, “That- that won’t fuckin’ do.”

“He refuses to watch it, Tommy,” Wilbur says as they continue walking down the street, humming a little, “I’ve tried convincing him plenty of times but he won’t listen to me. He’s stubborn as shit.”

Tommy begins giggling at this, moving the tank in his hands a bit as he tries to cover up the fact that he’s laughing.

Wilbur raises an eyebrow at him, “What’s so funny?”

“You- *hehe*, stubborn as *shit*. That’s so true.”

Wilbur pauses as he processes the fact that Tommy had told him a literal shit joke and then the man’s nose wrinkles.

“What are you, like, twelve?” he asks in disgust.

“What? What? What’s wrong with a good shit joke?” Tommy frowns at him, “Shit’s my favourite thing to joke *and* talk about.”

“I fucking hate you. What’s wrong with you?” Wilbur whispers in horror. “You know what? Give Oswald back. I’m taking him.”

Tommy gasps, immediately wrapping his arms tighter around the tank, backing away from Wilbur, “No. You wouldn’t- you *can*’t. Oswald and I are bound now- we are platonic soulmates, if you will. They are my child. You can’t simply take them. I won’t *let* you.”

Wilbur makes a face, holding his hands up, “You have fucking issues, man. You can’t be platonic soulmates with a fucking *fish*.”

“Don’t say that!” Tommy says with a gasp, his arms tightening around the axolotl tank, “You’ll upset Oswald!”

Wilbur squints at the boy, taking in the slight boyish look to his face as if for the first time now, the way his eyes look slightly sparkly, and...

Honestly...

“Are you literally twelve years old?” Wilbur asks genuinely, and slightly worriedly.

“Fuck you, fuck you, I hate you and your stupid receding hairline and your emo outfits,” Tommy hisses. That doesn’t really answer his question. “Go- go fuck off and buy your dumb black coffees elsewhere from now on. I can walk *myself home like a big man*.”

*Wilbur softens at this a little.*

*“Nah, I don’t think I will,” he says nonchalantly, although he means it. He doesn’t plan on leaving. Not anytime soon.*

*“Well, guess I’ll just have to kill you then,” Tommy says, so nonchalantly that it startles Wilbur and sends him into a spiel of chuckles, immediately elbowing Tommy in the side as he laughs.*

*“You couldn’t be able to kill me if you tried,” Wilbur seethes with a sharp grin, tossing an arm around Tommy’s shoulder, the kid immediately squawking in retort, pushing against the man’s arm and trying to get out from underneath it.*

*“Yes- yes I totally could!” Tommy squeaks out, slapping at Wilbur’s arms while the older man laughs gently.*

*“Why don’t you kill me this weekend, then?” he teases. “We can go to the park on Saturday or something like you wanted to do before, remember?”*

*It’s Tommy’s turn to soften this time and he snorts, rolling his eyes despite the warmth he feels that Wilbur actually wants to hang out with him sometime out of work hours.*

*That Tommy isn’t really just some kid at a bookstore Wilbur chats with because he’s bored but maybe... even a friend?*

*The thought or mere idea of that makes Tommy feel so overwhelmed that he just glares at Wilbur.*

*“Okay, fine, I guess I will hang out with you, you clingy bitch,” he grumbles at the man, smacking Wilbur’s again, the guy finally relenting with a final laugh and a ruffle of Tommy’s curls, “Now get your super stinky rich hands off of me you absolute rat bastard.”*

---



*Tommy is half asleep when the knock at his door has him stumbling off of his sofa and clamoring over to the front of his apartment, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.*

*He walks past the tank that Wilbur had helped him set up, which rests on his kitchen counter, Oswald swimming around excitedly upon seeing him, but Tommy's a little too tired right now to focus on his beloved Oswald.*

*Upon reaching his front door, Tommy at least has the common sense this time to peek through the hole in the door, groaning in anguish when he sees the familiar looming figure of the fucking Blade standing in front of his apartment.*

*And his day was going so well, too.*

*(He should've known that it was all a lie).*

*Tommy pulls the front door open, his form sagging a bit as he glares up at the Blade, "Fuck y'u doin' here again?"*

*"Well, since you kicked me out last time I visited because I came in through the window," The Blade begins with a drawl, "I figured I would come in what you called the 'normal' way and at a pretty normal time."*

*Normal time, my ass, Tommy thinks to himself as he bitterly glances at the time over the oven which reads 1:03 am. At least it's a bit better than four, though.*

*"Speaking of my window," Tommy slurs, tilting his head back to glare at the still broken window that he's pinned a very thin blanket over top of, "You still haven't fixed it, dickhead, even though you said you would."*

*"I'll fix it after the debt is up," The Blade responds simply with a shrug, his head tilting slowly downwards to look back at Tommy from the broken window.*

*"Do you just sleep all the time or something?" The Blade muses suddenly, apparently taking in Tommy's wrinkled clothing and disgruntled state.*

*"Fuck you," Tommy responds with a faux sweet tone, flipping the villain off.*

*The Blade snorts, "So are you gonna invite me in or just postpone our blood debt another couple weeks?"*

*Tommy stands there for a second, as though processing what the villain had just said before shrugging and moving aside, allowing the Blade to walk into his apartment.*

*(He had seriously considered making the Blade leave just to spite the guy before remembering that it was going to impact him more negatively than the latter).*

*"Your apartment seems to shrink every time I visit," the Blade hums, his head turned particularly in the direction of Tommy's new pet axolotl, as though minorly intrigued at the creature swimming around enthusiastically.*

*Tommy's eyes narrow at him, following his gaze.*

*"You can insult my apartment all you want but if you lay a fucking finger on Oswald or his tank, I'll filet you like a fish," Tommy mutters reverently, trying his best to sound ominous and terrifying but it just comes out as someone still ridden with sleep.*

*The Blade snorts.*

*"I'm not going to hurt Oswald," the man says, twisting the name with his words in a way that sounds mostly amused, "But you do know that I'm here to spar with you, right? I'm not just*

*here to insult your too-small apartment or worrying sleep schedule.”*

*Tommy nods, rubbing his eyes with his fists, trying to get any sort of lingering sleep out of them.*

*“I know, bitch, I’m not stupid,” Tommy hums, blinking a little against the blariness of the apartment around him.*

*“Do you want to postpone our lesson again?” The Blade asks for what feels like the third time, now sounding truly amused, especially when Tommy glares up at him furiously.*

*“No, no, we are not fuckin’ postponing our lesson,” Tommy hisses, and now he looks a little more awake than he had before, a finger pointing accusingly at the Blade, “I want to get this blood debt thing of yours over and done with, off of my plate, and fucking gone so I can just live my life, thank you.”*

*The Blade raises an eyebrow despite knowing that Tommy won’t be able to see it, but then the man just turns back to the door, which had remained wide open, allowing moonlight to stream through, “Shall we, then?”*

*Tommy watches the man carefully, taking another long look around his apartment, as if saying his final goodbyes to it.*

*Then he turns and follows the supervillain out of his apartment, still pretty tired and really unsure about his current life choices.*

---

*Tommy leans over the side of the tall building, frowning a bit suspiciously down at the dots of lights and the cars that pass by below, a cold breeze making him shiver and his bangs blow away from his face, tickling just above his brow.*

*Something familiar clicks with him, and he turns away from the edge of the building with a strange feeling bubbling in his throat, tapping his fingers against his thigh to distract himself.*

*The Blade stands not too far away, bending down beside an old tin box and shifting through it before pulling out two wooden swords — and Tommy immediately turns his nose up.*

*“Why the hell are we practicing with wooden swords?” he asks, trying his best not to conceal how incredibly disappointed he is with this ordeal.*

*“Why wouldn’t we?” The Blade drawls, sounding almost bored as he tosses a wooden sword in Tommy’s direction, the boy having to scramble to catch it easily, “It’s universal to use wooden swords when doing a beginner’s level of training in the art of sword fighting.”*

*Tommy huffs, snorting in irritation at how incredibly pretentious The Blade of all people was sounding. For a man that went around fighting against the heroes (who were just as stuck up as he seemed to be), he sure tends to talk like them sometimes.*

*(A chill rushes up his spine at who the Blade reminds him of, a distant feeling of an emotion he wishes he no longer had making his hands shake and his fingers grow numb. He tightens his grip on the wooden sword in his hands, trying to fight off the feeling).*

*The Blade saunters forwards, and Tommy’s first instinct is to flee with how incredibly terrifying the man looks walking towards him, practically looming over him with a height no person should be allowed to have —*

*— and then it hits Tommy all too suddenly, as if someone reached into his head and flicked on a switch, or finally put together the final piece on a game of Mystery.*

*Tommy backs away, holding his sword up with shaking arms, because he’d forgotten with how tired he was, how lost in his own mind of holy shit he was going to be taught sword fighting by the Blade and also oh my god I’m going to spar with a literal supervillain, why*

*can't I just be a normal fucking civilian?, unable to realize the major fucking elephant in the room.*

*The Blade was a member of the Syndicate — hell, some even called him the founder of the cult of supervillains, despite him always being treated as a member one level beneath the true leader.*

*The Archangel, with a big hat that overshadowed the upper half of his face and blonde hair that curled underneath his pointed ears.*

*How could Tommy forget that?*

*How could he possibly forget that he had been a fucking witness just a couple days ago to one of the other Syndicate members' murders?*

*(Not to mention that everyone knew that the Bard was the lucky number three of the trio of Syndicate members, the one who always seemed to wander the night with the rest of his strange, almost family-like supervillains trailing right beside him).*

*Tommy's grip grew tighter around the wooden blade more and he backed away from The Blade, who was now walking towards him so quickly, so fast that Tommy wasn't sure if he'd be able to say goodbye because he was a witness and witnesses had to die in the Syndicate, and the Blade probably knew about it, and—*

*"Kid," a voice says calmly, a little too calmly and there's someone kneeling down right in front of him and he can feel eyes watching him that makes him shift uncomfortably. "Tommy, kid, are you alright?"*

*"I'm—" Tommy slowly looks up at the Blade, who has completely stopped everything, has even gone as far as putting his own wooden training sword down to kneel in front of Tommy, to ask if he's alright.*

*Tommy has a sudden curl of warmth in his chest and a pricking of something strange at the corner of his eyes but he ignores it, averting his eyes to the ground, "I'm sorry."*

*The Blade exhales a bit, "Don't apologize."*

*Tommy just hums a little in his throat, refusing to look back up at the Blade, because what if this is all a trick, and he's just being strung along like bait at this point?*

*It wouldn't be surprising — not really.*

*Despite the way Tommy couldn't give a shit about supervillains or heroes (honestly, both annoyed him to an equal amount), it was a normal thing for someone of either side to just... string a normal, totally harmless citizen along for the fun of it.*

*(For many supervillains or heroes get bored. Tommy has seen it one too many times).*

*"Do you want to get back to training?" The Blade wonders, breaking Tommy from his thoughts.*

*The villain's tone edges on something genuine that Tommy almost feels like he can say not to, that he can return to his apartment for a little while before he dies, that he can say goodbye to his axoltol who he will surely be gifting back to Wilbur, and fuck, say goodbye to Wilbur as well...*

*"Yeah," is all Tommy mutters, hand reaching out to grab the wooden sword he'd dropped when he'd started to freak out, and a cold breeze passes him by (it's so familiar that Tommy has to dig his fingernails into his palms to ignore it). "Let's... just get back to sparring."*

---

*Techno knows the way someone looks when they've been trained.*

*He can see it in Wilbur, a man of many words and songs that float in your ears and wrap you up in a blanket.*

*He can see it in Tubbo, a kid forced to be an adult much too quickly, an empty look in gray-resembling eyes and a sharp grin whenever something that interests him is brought up (but anytime else, a blank stare).*

*He can even see it in himself when he looks into the mirror, crimson eyes boring back at him, a green emerald discarded onto the bathroom sink, lip curled around sharpened teeth.*

*(A soldier rescued from what could've been).*

*Techno can especially, though, see it in Tommy— the way the kid reacts to certain things, the way his eyes tend to gloss over if something is brought up that resurfaces memories (that shouldn't even be there to begin with), the way the kid walks with a slouch as though trying to hide everything about himself, golden curls spilling into blue eyes.*

*And Techno can particularly notice it in the way Tommy spars with him.*

*It doesn't take sharp eyes to tell that Tommy knows what he's doing, with every dodge and sharp jab, Techno can see (even with how inexperienced Tommy is still) that the boy has sword fought before.*

*Which only begs a couple questions, Techno realizes after concluding their first sword fighting lesson and sending Tommy home (trying to ignore how relieved the boy seemed, as though Techno had just stood over him and told him that he would spare his life rather than kill him).*

*Who had trained him, and were they the reason Tommy was so skittish? Was the person who taught Tommy to act so brash and then pull an entire 180 purely out of fear, were they the same person who'd inflicted the different bandages on Tommy's arms and neck?*

*Whatever the answer (whoever the answer, more like), Techno could almost feel the familiarity of a bloodthirsty rage building up in the back of his throat.*

...

*Wilbur was going to be elated when Techno gets home.*

---

*Tommy stares out the window over the city back in his apartment, deja vu to the many nights before that he had done this same thing, watching the lights flicker and go out before turning back on over the city.*

*It's cold, it's so cold and Tommy can't help but think back to the ways had been once before, to the way things ended so quickly, to the reckless nature that he so hated about himself.*

...

*If he wanted to be able to walk home again, to not have to drag along one of his friends for a feeling of some sort of security (a lifeline, if you will), then Tommy...*

*He's going to have to destroy that hoodie, honestly.*

*It's the most logical option, obviously, but...*

*Tommy wouldn't exactly call himself a hoarder or anything, but he hated getting rid of items, even things such as worthless or simple as the hoodie he'd stuffed into the back of his closet out of paranoia.*



*It really would be such a waste of a comfortable hoodie to destroy it over the sake of a dumb fucking stuck up supervillain.*

*Tommy decides to take his chances.*

## Chapter End Notes

as per usual, tommy has no braincell.

hope u enjoyed (: i'm really tired rn so this chapter is kinda shit but!! good news(?), i might be taking a break for a hot second because god damn am i burnt out and i don't feel good at a l l mate.

hope this holds u over for a min<3 thank u all for the comments, bookmarks, hits & kudos :D they mean the world to me aaa!!

# that's my pond you're stealing, asshole!

## Chapter Summary

The water flutters a bit in the breeze, sunlight sparkling off the surface like stars in a night sky.

“It is pretty lovely,” Wilbur murmurs gently, and Tommy turns to him, that smile on his face that so closely resembles a sunrise.

“It is, innit?”

Wilbur returns the smile, and an idea clicks in his head, suddenly reaching out and grabbing Tommy by the shoulders in his excitement, the boy looking up to frown at him in confusion.

Before Tommy can even say anything, Wilbur blurts out,

“Tommy, would you like to help me make an ecosystem?”

or, *a lot* of crimeboys content, some bedrock bros, and finally 4/4 sbi again !! woo!! fluffy chapter, come take ur fluff & go before it turns angsty<3

## Chapter Notes

so... that vlog, huh?

crimeboys apparently want me dead with all this content! because i am in shambles  
hhhhhdhdhdjdfj /j /lh

---

**TWs:** derealization, mentions of bruising & implied child abuse & bandages, talk of blood, minor panic attack, self-hatred, vague mentions of death, possessive behavior (it is all platonic, you fucks. do not take it as anything but platonic), & disordered eating. (lmk if i missed anything, stay safe<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy's entire body aches when he wakes up the next morning. He hadn't trained in a long time and the panic attack he'd had only made it worse, unfortunately.

He's just grateful that it's a weekend and that he doesn't have much to do except lay on the sofa and potentially talk to Oswald.

(He considers calling Tubbo and asking him to come over, but the idea of trying to do something that involves moving too much makes his entire body only feel heavier).

A cold breeze drifts in through the window, billowing against the blanket he'd pinned up above it, and Tommy relaxes into the cushions of his sofa again, arms feeling like lead and a yawn escaping his mouth.

Maybe he can let himself sleep just a little bit longer...

---

It feels like only seconds pass before Tommy's jolted awake by his phone ringing, the obnoxious sound of a song from a certain video game's OST echoing in the rather empty apartment.

Drearily, he reaches out and picks his phone up, pressing his ear to the cell without even checking the contact name, muttering, "Hello?"

“Tommy!” an enthusiastic Wilbur says from the other line and Tommy holds back a groan of irritation — before he’s suddenly very awake because *when the hell did Wilbur get his number?*

“Where did you get this number, shithead?” Tommy grumbles.

“You sound really tired, Toms,” Wilbur hums, tone twinging with concern, “Did you get enough sleep last night? You really should sleep more, it’s good for your health and it’s upsetting to see you with your dark circles at work all the time.”

“You’re avoiding my question, Wil.”

Wilbur sighs.

“Fine. I got it from Phil.”

Tommy makes a face, even though he’s aware that Wilbur can’t see it.

“What? Fuck do you mean, *you got it from Phil?* He wouldn’t just give away my personal information to some fucking weird emo guy who comes into his bookstore just to chat with his best employee,” Tommy hisses.

“Ah, well...” Wilbur chuckles nervously, sounding quite guilty about something, “You see, uh... Phil’s my father.”

...

“*What?*”

Wilbur's suddenly chuckling now, sounding very much amused at the fact he's just made Tommy feel like he's in a whole different fucking timeline.

"You're— are you— *what?*" Tommy splutters out, really unable to say anything more than that at how bewildered he is. "What fucking timeline is this? Are you shitting me right now, Wilbur Soot? If that's even your surname, you liar."

This only makes Wilbur laugh more, much to his irritation.

"Stop fucking laughing, dickhead! Explain yourself!" Tommy hisses into the phone, eyes narrowing, slowly getting to his feet so that he can do what he calls an *angry pace around his apartment to collect his thoughts*. "You're fucking with me, right?"

"No, Tommy, I'm not fucking with you," Wilbur says between giggles.

"Then prove it, you bastard! Put Phil on the phone right now."

Wilbur snorts and then there's the sound of rustling, of someone talking, of another person laughing loudly, and then—

"Hey, mate," Phil says, sounding just as amused as Wilbur, "So the cat's outta the bag, huh?"

Tommy does the only reasonable thing.

He hangs up the phone.

---

“This is— this is fucking *disgraceful*, ” Tommy spits out at a Wilbur who stands grinning in his doorway, hands behind his back and rocking from his heels and onto his toes (much like Tommy does), dressed up in the same outfit that makes him look like a fancy vampire. “I can’t believe you didn’t fucking tell me that your father is also my *literal boss* and then just show up on my doorstep after leaving me, like, fifty missed calls.”

“It was only like ten missed calls, Toms, don’t overex—”

“We are no longer besties. We- we are no longer *pseudo-brothers*, if you will,” Tommy interrupts, turning his face away from the man with his arms crossed, as though he has just tossed the most offensive comment the guy’s way.

Wilbur’s eyebrow raises at this, and he almost looks sad for a moment, when his expression is much too quickly swapped for something smug that Tommy doesn’t like *at all*.

“So what you’re saying is,” Wilbur begins, his voice slow and eyes turning up into crescent moons when he smiles all stupid and smug like, leaning down almost eye level with Tommy, “That we *were* brothers, then?”

Tommy flushes.

He’s been pushed into a corner here.

(He didn’t actually compute saying that out loud until Wilbur had confirmed it).

“Leave my fucking house,” he manages to say between bristles, pointing down the walkway for the man to take the stairs back down to the first floor.

Wilbur frowns and then says with a whine, “But we were gonna go to the park, weren’t we? You said we were so that you could properly kill me or whatever. Are you going back on your promise?”

He does have a point.

Tommy can properly invoke his revenge upon the guy there.

But he didn't exactly make a promise.

... *But*, it would be fun to push Wilbur into that pond he's seen at the park before.

So, Tommy glares at him silently for a couple moments (hating the way Wilbur just patiently waits for his answer), before hissing, "*Fine*. Wait here."

Then the door is slammed shut in Wilbur's face.

---

Wilbur's in his room when Techno gets home, hunched over his desk that has a mound of scattered papers and fresh parchment atop of it, some papers balled up underneath it by his feet as the man furiously writes something onto a new piece with a quill.

Usually when he's this immersed in his work ("Songwriting is an art where I must not be disturbed ever. I must concentration with every ounce of my *being*," Wilbur had claimed ominously once when Techno had gone in to pull him to patrol), Techno doesn't even try to talk to him, but...

He'll probably be interested in what he has to say since it involves Tommy this time.

With a quick shove to the back of Wilbur's head, Techno gets his attention, his twin brother turning and glaring at him with fire in his eyes.

“What do you want, prick?” he asks — usually he’d be a lot more irritated, but when Techno bothers him, he tends to know it must be something important. Techno wasn’t dumb enough (or cared enough) to disturb Wilbur when he was busy unless it required immediate attention.

“I just got back from my first lesson with Tommy,” Techno says, humming and taking a seat on the edge of Wilbur’s bed, the man immediately frowning (he *hates* when Techno sits anywhere before changing out of his bloodied villain outfit, but tonight it was simply covered in asphalt from training on the rooftop of an abandoned work building).

“Hmm,” Wilbur just says, a bit uninterested in this, turning away from Techno to continue scratching at the parchment with his quill, “Did he do well?”

“A lot more than I expected,” Techno admits, approval clear in his tone. “He almost seems... *trained*.”

Wilbur tenses a little, his hand poised over the next word he’d been writing, eyeing his brother out the corner of his eye.

“What are you trying to imply, Technoblade?” Wilbur asks venomously.

“You know *exactly* what I’m implying, Wil.”

Wilbur’s silent for a moment.

“Do you think he’s a hero, then?” he asks and Techno immediately snorts at the idea.

“Do you seriously think a hero would go out of their way to save someone like me?” Techno drawls and Wilbur’s shoulders relax a little bit. “A *vigilante*, however...”



Wilbur exhales, dropping his quill to the desk with a clatter, running his hands up and down his face, “Is that all you wanted to tell me? That Tommy could potentially be just some vigilante?”

“Not really,” Techno begins, and Wilbur turns carefully in his chair, looking exhausted, his curls a little messed up from relentlessly dragging a hand through them (picking his brain for lyrical ideas, undoubtedly).

“What else is it, then?”

“When I say the word *trained*,” Techno hums, flicking a piece of gravel off of his clothing, “I mean that I think he was *taught* to act the way he does sometimes by someone.”

Techno’s eyes flicker up to Wilbur, the two of them sharing a dangerous look.

“What do you expect to do about it?” Wilbur asks with a sharp tone, eyes twinkling with something that bites.

Techno just shrugs.

If his theory is right, he knows exactly what he will do, and he’s more than certain both Phil and Wilbur will help him do it.

“We shall see.”

---

“You know, Toms, you could’ve been a lot nicer,” Wilbur says, making a pouting face as the two wander through the park after Tommy had changed into a couple more pairs of sweaters. “You didn’t have to slam the door in my face.”

Tommy smirks a little, shrugging.

“Take it as payback for not telling me ahead of time that Phil was literally your dad.”

“Oh come on,” Wilbur frowns, “Is it *really* that big of a deal?”

“Yes,” Tommy seethes, slapping Wilbur in the ribs, frowning at the man, “It *is* that big of a deal because Phil is an incredibly big man and one of the most poggers dude alive and also absolutely fucking scary as shit so it’s hard to believe that *you* of all people come from that guy.”

Wilbur blinks at him, “What the fuck did you even just say?”

Tommy sighs aggressively, the way he does when he’s aggravated.

“Fuckin’— whatever. Forget it, bitch,” he mutters, kicking a rock that’s in the way on the dirt path they walk on. “Lets just keep walking through this stupid park and- and lets also talk about women.”

Eventually, they reach a clearing in the park with nothing but wildflowers dotting the grass and a pond right in the middle, and Tommy rushes from where he’d been rambling by Wilbur’s side (something about how irritating his coworker, Jack, is), right up to the pond.

“Look how pretty it is, Wil,” Tommy says in a hushed tone, full of admiration, kneeling down beside the little pond to poke a lily pad on the surface. “I adore this pond. It’s so lovely and I have decided that I now own it.”

Wilbur, who had followed close behind and now bends down beside Tommy, a fond smile on his face, tilts his head, “You can’t just own a pond, Tommy.”

“I can and I will, because I say so,” Tommy responds in a hum, kneeling forwards a little more to touch a different lily pad with a flower on top of it. “I’ve named it Tom’s Pond.”

“You just named it after yourself?”

“Yeah, got a problem, bitch?”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, deciding not to respond, turning away to also touch one of the lily pads in the water with gentle hands.

The water flutters a bit in the breeze, sunlight sparkling off the surface like stars in a night sky.

“It is pretty lovely,” Wilbur murmurs gently, and Tommy turns to him, that smile on his face that so closely resembles a sunrise.

“It is, innit?”

Wilbur returns the smile, and an idea clicks in his head, suddenly reaching out and grabbing Tommy by the shoulders in his excitement, the boy looking up to frown at him in confusion.

Before Tommy can even say anything, Wilbur blurts out,

“Tommy, would you like to help me make an ecosystem?”

“I- *pardon?*”

Wilbur just grins wider.

---

“This— this is so fucking grim,” Tommy says with a remorseful look on his face, knees pulled up to his chest, sitting as far away from Wilbur as possible as the man scoops dirt and water into a jar they’d bought at the nearest market possible.

“It’s an ecosystem,” Wilbur says, his voice full of full adoration as he continues to scoop water into the jar.

“It looks more like a jar full of fucking dirt and tadpoles to me,” Tommy responds, shooting the man a deadpanned expression.

“To an ignorant child like you, it *would* seem that way,” Wilbur jokes, and Tommy’s face scrunches up.

“What the fuck, man?—”

Suddenly Wilbur gasps and he pulls his hands out of the pond, putting the lid onto the jar and turning excitedly to Tommy, holding out the dirty water towards the boy, grinning in a way that makes the corners of his eyes wrinkle.

“Look, Toms! My ecosystem!”

“Your ecosystem,” Tommy repeats, then realization seems to hit him and his face falls, his tone taking on something like a whine, “Wait- wait, Wil, *Wil*, that- that’s from my fuckin’ pond- Willlllll, that’s from *my* pond.”

The idea only makes Wilbur smile wider, “Yeah, and now it’s *my* ecosystem.”

“Nooo, man, that’s from *my* pond, what’s wrong with you?” Tommy complains, making a pouting face at Wilbur in hopes it would work. “You- you can’t just go around stealing a man’s pond water and creatures, asshole.”

Wilbur, the smart fucker, doesn’t even glance his way or acknowledge his last comment, “Yeah it *is* your pond, but now we have a *shared* ecosystem, isn’t that cool?”

“No, no, that is *not* cool, that is- it’s simply *stealing*, you prick,” Tommy says in a pout, letting go of his knees to move closer to Wilbur.

Wilbur ignores him again, holding the jar up in front of his eyes, beaming widely as he examines the small creatures inside of it, “I think I’ll name it.”

“No, you *cannot* name it, that’s my thing!”

Wilbur snorts, now turning to look at Tommy, who has sadly clamored over so that he sits beside Wilbur, curiously (and mournfully) looking at the ecosystem jar.

“Fine, then how about I let *you* name it, does that sound better?” Wilbur bribes, and Tommy lights up a tad.

“... I can maybe agree to that,” Tommy hums a little, sounding less upset.

“Let’s hear a name, then,” Wilbur says with a grin.

Tommy frowns a little, thinking as he gazes at the jar, moving closer so he can look into it, before reaching out his hands curiously, eyes flicking up to Wilbur, who looks positively and unbelievably *fond* as he gently sets the jar into Tommy’s hands.

Tommy gazes into it a little more, then his face morphs into an evil little grin and all at once, Tommy places the jar down onto the grass (very gently, mind you), and then tackles Wilbur,

pushing him into the pond, the man letting out a loud shriek.

“You *fucking*—!”

---

Wilbur trudges into his house, Tommy following close behind, coughing profusely with how hard he had been laughing, the two completely *drenched* in pond water.

Tommy’s arms are wrapped around the ecosystem jar, and he looks like Christmas has come early... while Wilbur looks more like he’d just seen some shit he regrets seeing.

After Tommy had tackled Wilbur into the pond and the two had fought in the water, screaming at each other all the while, Wilbur had practically forced him to come over to his house so that they could both get changed and not catch a cold.

Tommy agreed (but only after Wilbur bribed him with the chance of seeing the almighty Phil Craft outside of work. That was simply something that Tommy could not pass up).

“I fucking hate you,” Wilbur grumbles to Tommy as he leads him up the steps of his fucking *mansion* (it was actually just a normal, but very expensive penthouse, but the second Tommy walked inside he was floored at how expensive everything looked).

“No, no, you do not,” Tommy chirps in response, his voice slightly wavering at how completely infatuated he is with how the house looks, fingers gingerly skidding across the wall, as though terrified of touching something so *opulent*.

Wilbur snorts at the way the boy continues to look around, a weird expression on his face, and continues leading him up the steps until they reach a long hallway.

Wilbur motions to a room in particular, “This is one of the bathrooms, you can use it to take a shower. There’s shampoos and shit in there, but it’s Techno’s bathroom specifically, so it’s all of his weird expensive shampoos because he’s ridiculous. I’ll go get you some clothing you can change into.”

Tommy blinks a little, reaching out to touch the handle of the bathroom door that looks like it’s made of silver, then looking up at Wilbur in confusion, “You... what do you mean?”

“What- what do *you* mean?” Wilbur frowns a little; he was certain he had explained it fairly well.

At seeing Tommy’s face still showing full confusion, Wilbur repeats, “Uh... you can take a shower and wash off the gross pond water and I’ll get you some of my clothes to change into...?”

“Oh,” Tommy repeats and it’s soft, and then the boy clears his throat, returning to his normal tone, “I mean- yeah. I knew that. I’ll uh.. just take a nice *warm* shower then...”

Tommy opens the door warily, then turns quickly and pushes the ecosystem jar that he’d been hugging to his chest into Wilbur’s hands, “Here.”

Then Tommy quickly goes into the bathroom and shuts the door, leaving a very confused Wilbur in his wake.

---

Tommy isn’t used to warm showers, or really showers at all.

As much as he hates to admit it, the only time he really is able to take even the vaguest of warm showers is when he visits Tubbo and Ranboo’s flat and the two let him use one of their showers (but he always has a limit, because they are no more rich than he is).

The shower is... extremely nice, honestly, and the aching in his body returns tenfold against the warm water, and he feels extremely exhausted out of nowhere, arms wrapping around himself.

He gets out of the shower not too long after washing his hair - with some really nice scented stuff in one of the bathroom holders, something that reminds him of honeysuckle and dandelions and has weirdly never been used.

(He doesn't dare glance in the mirror, at the bruises staining his skin or the now wet bandages wrapped around his neck down, stopping right above his hipbone that he refuses to change ever. He knows what he looks like, he hates to remind himself of it).

Tommy moves cautiously over to the bathroom door and opens the door slightly, revealing folded clothing sitting right outside the door — an extremely soft jumper and a pair of folded trousers.

Sitting right on top of the clothing is a big pair of turquoise socks with orcas on them that Tommy mentally notes to make fun of Wilbur for later.

*None of these clothes are going to fit*, he thinks to himself bitterly, but puts them on anyway.

---

Tommy moves down the hallway, his arms wrapped around himself, fingers twisted into the fabric of the jumper that he practically *swims* in (it floods below his knees and he has to roll the sleeves up — the trousers, or sweatpants, as well bunch up around his ankles and he had to quadruple tie the waist knot to make them stay).

Water drips down his neck from his hair, and a shiver goes up his spine about the troupe of red hair dye dripping red when washed...



Then realizes with a frown that he... he's in fucking *Wilbur's* house. In the shower he had been so immersed in how warm the water was and how nice the never used shampoo smelled, but... he has no clue where the fuck to go now.

So, he does the only thing he can think of and goes downstairs cautiously, trying to make his footsteps as quiet as possible, and—

“So Wilbur finally dragged you home,” a familiar monotone voice says and Tommy flinches, glancing over the staircase railing to find a rather domestic looking Technoblade watching him with the same blank look on his face.

“Don't- you can't just scare me like that, prick,” Tommy responds, narrowing his eyes, “And what the hell do you mean ‘finally?’”

Techno ignores the question, watching Tommy with a careful expression as the boy continues down the steps and stops in front of the man, his nose wrinkling when he has to practically *crane* his neck up to look at him, just as he has to do with both Wilbur and Ranboo.

It's fucking annoying.

“You're too tall,” Tommy decides, voice lilting, “I think you should do something about that.”

“How exactly am I supposed to do something about that, kid?”

“Hmm, I recommend simply *shrinking*,” Tommy says with a sharp grin, Techno rolling his eyes a bit at that.

Tommy swivels his head around then, looking at all the stuff around, and sniffing a bit before muttering, “Also, uh... I have no idea where the fuck I am, so could you uh... do me a favour and show me the most poggers part of the house?”

Techno hums in accordance, tilting his head to the right a little, motioning for Tommy to follow him.

“Just try not to drip your wet hair everywhere.”

“No promises.”

---

Tommy is in complete awe.

He is positively at full pog right now.

There’s a library in this fucker’s ~~penthouse~~ *mansion*. And it’s bigger than the one he works at, which he had assumed to be physically *impossible*.

“Holy fucking shit,” he whispers, unable to think of any other possible words to describe what he feels right now, blue eyes full of stars.

Techno snickers a little, the little *heh heh* that Tommy had grown so accustomed to, and a big hand reaches out to ruffle his wet curls.

“Ew, I forgot your hair was wet,” Techno then complains, reaching out and wiping his hand on Tommy’s borrowed jumper, nose wrinkled in disgust.

“Hey, bitch!” Tommy squawks, slapping Techno’s hand away, eyebrows furrowed, “Don’t just wipe your wet hand on my fucking sweater, prick!”

“Hmm, pretty sure that’s *Wilbur’s* sweater,” Techno chides, and then he looks mildly amused, muttering something that sounds like ‘possessive bastard’.

Tommy decides to ignore it in order to now look around at the large bookshelves looming over the two of them, to walk over to stand in the sunlight of the big bay window on the other side of the room, shivering in the warmth of the sun pouring onto him, the smell of old books so familiar and so comforting...

“*There* you two are,” Wilbur’s voice floats into the room, the heavy dark oak door shifting open with a creak when the man walks in, sounding a little exasperated and relieved, “I’ve been looking for you for *ten minutes*, Tommy.”

Tommy just hums in response, putting his hand up against the glass of the window, his palm heating up especially as the sun hits it.

“You’re so overprotective,” Techno comments in a hushed tone to Wilbur once the man leans against the wall.

Wilbur huffs a laugh as he watches Tommy with a calm, fond expression, “Says *you*, Mr. I-Nearly-Killed-Someone-For-No-Reason-Because-Tommy-Showed-Signs-of-Trauma.”

Techno ignores that because Tommy turns at this moment, his smile so *genuine* that it outshines even the sun floating in through the windows, “This is seriously a part of your fuckin *house*? This big ass library? This- this is so cool,”

“It really is, isn’t it?” Wilbur hums with a smile in return.

The man had never enjoyed the library this much before today.

Techno has to agree.

---

Tommy sprawls out on the large, *extremely* comfortable sofa in the living room, laying down on his side as he always does, curling up, “This is so fucking comfortable, what the hell?”

Wilbur, who plops down beside the boy, snickers a little, tossing his arm around the back of the sofa, “You’re not the only one who thinks so. It’s Phil’s favourite place in the house, other than what we call his *grandpa chair*.”

Tommy shoots up like a rocket at the mention of Phil, eyes suddenly wide, “Holy shit, I forgot- you- oh my Gods. Where is Phil?”

“He’s out at the grocery right now,” Wilbur snorts when Tommy’s face falls a little, quick to reassure, “But he will be back later tonight, if you’d like to stay for a bit longer.”

Tommy frowns, considering this.

On one hand, he kind of wants to go home so that he can relax comfortably in his *own* home, so that he doesn’t have to watch his tongue or what he says like he does when he’s around others, but on the other hand...

Wilbur’s house is so incredibly warm, and so is his jumper and the borrowed trousers and the extremely warm (but stupid) socks, and then there’s also the opportunity to see Phil and make fun of him.

“Okay,” Tommy says gently, turning to Wilbur who looks positively elated at his answer. “But only until Phil gets home, then I’m leaving, bitch boy.”

“Of course, of course,” Wilbur says, still grinning that stupid, dopey grin of his. “In the meantime, do you want to watch a movie?”

“What... uh, what kinda movie?” Tommy begins warily. He is not liking the mischievous grin on Wilbur’s face at all. For all he knows, this guy watches weird documentaries about animals and is actually *interested* in them.

Tommy’s short attention span couldn’t last even *five minutes* of a documentary.

“I was thinking I’d show you one of my favourite movies,” Wilbur said with a shrug, getting up from the sofa and stretching a bit, walking over to the television and bending down to the multiple discs stacked.

“What movie is that...?” Tommy continues, sitting up against the couch, pulling his knees to his chest. “If it’s some dumbass documentary shit, I’m going to absolutely stab you.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes as he pulls a disc out from the dvds, standing up straight and flashing the cover in Tommy’s direction, “We’re watching *Spirited Away*, not a fucking *documentary*, you gremlin.”

“Thank fucking God,” Tommy sighs, then he frowns, “Wait, what? Is *Spirited Away* scary? It sounds scary.”

“Aww, are you scared, Toms?” Wilbur mocks, and Tommy’s face twists up in disgust.

“No, I’m not fuckin’ *scared*, it was a normal question, idiot,” Tommy hisses defensively.

“Well, to answer your ‘normal’ question, no, it isn’t a horror movie,” Wilbur responds, putting the disc into the DVD player, “It’s a Studio Ghibli film, actually.”

“A what?”

Wilbur spins around, looking dismayed, “You... you don’t know what fucking Studio Ghibli is?”

“No?” Tommy blinks, “Should I??”

“That is even worse than Techno not seeing *Doctor Who*,” Wilbur says, taking the remote from next to the DVD player and then flopping back down onto the sofa, “If we are gonna be brothers, then you have to watch Studio Ghibli films. I’m going to keep you here until we watch all of them, starting with *Spirited Away*.”

“What the hell?” Tommy grimaces, despite the warmth in his chest that comes when Wilbur calls them *brothers*, “You- you can’t just keep me here against my will, bitch.”

Wilbur just hums, pressing play on the movie, “We will see if you even *want* to leave after you watch this.”

---

Tommy’s wrapped in a blanket (brought into the room by Techno, who had decided to join them in watching *Spirited Away*, sat in the chair that Wilbur had said was Phil’s grandpa chair) when Phil walks into the house.

It’s nearing the end of the movie and Tommy is so infatuated with the animated movie that he barely moves his eyes from the screen when Phil walks in, arms full of groceries.

Beside him, Wilbur is sprawled out on the sofa, resting back against the cushions with his feet propped up on the coffee table. He looks over when Phil walks in, and Techno leans his head back to watch their father walk inside.

“Hey, Phil,” Techno calls, and *now* Tommy looks up, eyes wide (despite the way they had been slowly dropping through the movie).

“Holy shit, it’s *true*, ” Tommy hisses, and Phil lets out a string of chuckles, maneuvering around the living room to go into the kitchen with his grocery bags.

“Hi, mate,” Phil says to Tommy as he walks, not even having to look at the TV screen to know what movie’s playing, “I see Wil’s forced you into watching one of his favourite movies.”

“Yes,” Tommy nods feverently, still in shock that Wilbur hadn’t been lying to him about Phil being his literal *father*.

But... Tommy decides to bookmark this for later.

He has to know what happens next in *Spirited Away* or he just might die.

---

Tommy’s sniffing a little once the movie’s finished, doing his best to hide it by wrapping the blanket tighter around himself and his head, sipping a little to his curls cover his eyes, but it doesn’t stop the concerned sound coming from both Wilbur and Techno.

“Toms?” Wilbur murmurs, and a hand touches his shoulder gently, “Are you okay?”

“I’m *fine*, ” Tommy replies, trying to sound aggressive as normal but his voice cracks a little, “It’s just... she... she got back home to her *family*. ”

*Oh*, Wilbur thinks, and without another thought he’s holding his arms out.

Tommy glances at him and then, with a moment of hesitation, the boy leans all of his weight forwards into Wilbur’s arms, being immediately swept up into the warmth, a chin resting on his curls as he snuffles a little.

It's pathetic, really, for him to be so *vulnerable* like this, crying from a dumbass animated movie about such a reason as family.

(He's never had a family before, at least, not one that ever *lasted*, and the thought only makes the tears worse).

It's especially stupid of him to be crying about it in this guy's arms, a guy who started coming into the bookstore only a month ago and had quickly become someone Tommy considered a friend (*a brother*; a voice whispered in his mind).

"Shhh," the man who Tommy had once sworn he despised, a hand running through his curls and another resting against his back all featherlight (because when it had pushed against his back to hold him more protectively, Tommy had winced terribly). "You're okay, Toms. You're okay."

Thank you, Tommy wants to say, but he can't, because he just might sob more if he does.

Instead, he leans further into the warmth, and lets himself be comforted, for once. Just this once.

---

"So, it's kinda strange seeing me outside of work, huh?" Phil says from the other side of the dinner table, smiling gently at Tommy, who has stopped crying and now gives Phil a rather strange expression.

"*Very* strange," Tommy admits, turning his eyes away to stare at the food Phil had put on his plate — it was something he had never seen before, a concoction of soft bread, almost... like a pie of some sorts?



*Do rich people eat dessert before dinner?* Tommy thinks, blinking a little at the pie in front of him.

Techno must feel his confusion, because he looks over from where he's sat beside Tommy (much to Wilbur's despair, who probably wanted to sit by Tommy, big L for him), "It's got vegetables and meat inside."

"Oh," Tommy says, picking up the fork from the table gingerly (everything in this fucking house is so *expensive*) poking the pie in front of him.

He stares at it for a moment (unaware of the three amused people watching him while eating the pie themselves), before Tommy suddenly stabs the pie aggressively, looking inside at the vegetables and meat now spilling out onto his plate.

He bends down to look at it closer, but is interrupted by a long string of wheezing laughter from Wilbur.

Tommy glances up from his plate to give Wilbur a death glare, the man clearly looking as though he'd been trying hard to hold back from laughing the entire time.

"Stop laughing, prick!"

Wilbur chokes a little, snorting and ducking underneath the table to conceal his minuted chuckles from Tommy, his curls and hunched over back the only thing visible over the table.

Unamused, Tommy scoops a bit of the strange meat pie onto his fork and gingerly takes a bite.

*Holy fuck, that's amazing*, he thinks, his eyes widening before he takes another less wary bite.

Much better than the instant noodles he eats sometimes when he's got the money for them, or the long since cold bread Sam sneaks to him free of charge sometimes.

"Like it?" Phil asks him, his own voice sounding similar to Wilbur's, full of amusement.

Tommy nods very ferociously, his mouth full as he tries to say, "Thank you" to Phil.

Techno huffs from next to him and Phil just smiles, his eyes wrinkling in the corners much like Wilbur's own.

(Tommy can see how the guy is really Wilbur's father now with the way he smiles).

---

After dinner, the three return to the sofa, now accompanied by Phil Craft himself, who reclaims his seat in his grandpa chair, forcing a disgruntled Techno to sit down on the sofa.

"What are we watching next?" Tommy asks, bordering on enthusiastic as he looks with wide eyes at Wilbur, grins at the eagerness in the boy's tone.

"I say we watch something that's actually good this time." Techno drawls, making Wilbur have to reach over Tommy to smack his brother fiercely in the arm.

"We're binging Studio Ghibli because Tommy hasn't seen it and because *I* said so," Wilbur announces, sounding very much like a tory.

Techno narrows his eyes a little and goes to smack Wilbur back, but Phil interjects with a sharp cough.

“Boys,” Phil warns from his comfortable position on the chair, but his tone doesn’t show any form of irritation or anger, only fondness.

(Tommy can’t really understand how this entire fucking family can be so incredibly... whatever the fuck that feeling was. *Fondness*. It’s something Tommy can’t perceive, really).

“Fine, but can it be *my* favourite Ghibli movie this time?” Techno huffs.

“No, we are not showing the child *Princess Mononoke* yet,” Wilbur tsk’s, standing and flicking through the various DVDs, pulling another one out. “I say we watch *Howl’s Moving Castle* instead. I have a feeling he will like Calcifer.”

“How does a castle move?” Tommy pipes up, wrapping the blanket around himself again, feeling a lot more tired than he had before. The food Phil had fed him made him *incredibly* exhausted. Maybe he drugged it.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Wilbur flashes him a grin, putting the DVD into the player.

As soon as the guy - Howl, Tommy presumed - comes on screen, Tommy frowns a little.

“That guy dresses like Wilbur,” he announces, yawning a little afterwards.

“Is that a compliment?” Wilbur asks, sounding conflicted.

“No, it just means that you look like a stupid rich *tory*. ”

Phil bursts into laughter, and Wilbur’s face falls.

“What the fuck—”

“Take that, nerd.”

---

There’s a heavy weight on Wilbur’s side, and the man turns with a frown, immediately softening when he sees Tommy leaning into his arm, golden and red curls pressed up against his shoulder, mouth hanging open a little.

(Other than that, Tommy looks... so peaceful, much alike to what Wilbur remembered from when he’d stayed at the house when sick. There is no longer a wrinkle between his eyebrows, no longer a constant scowl on his face).

Wilbur coos softly, looking up from Tommy and at his twin, who is watching the two with what someone who doesn’t know him wouldn’t perceive as a fond expression.

(Wilbur, of course, knows better).

“He’s drooling on you,” Techno mutters simply, refusing to say anything even *remotely* sappy.

Wilbur just hums, uncaring, slowly slipping an arm around Tommy’s shoulders, careful not to wake him up.

Tommy moves closer in his sleep, his face buried right below Wilbur’s chin, an arm limply thrown around the man’s chest, humming in contentment.

“He really does look like a child, doesn’t he?” Phil muses from his chair, looking a mixture between fond as well and a little concerned.

“He *is* a child,” Wilbur responds simply, carding his fingers through Tommy’s hair so carefully, like a pianist would when performing a symphony.

“He doesn’t look eighteen,” Phil admits, sounding on the edge of horror, but not quite convinced.

“I don’t think he *is* eighteen,” Techno says from where he eyes Tommy.

“It’s hard to fake legal documents, Techno.” Phil says, although he still doesn’t sound entirely sure himself.

Techno doesn’t respond, eyes turning back to the TV.

“Not impossible, though.”

Wilbur, who had been ignoring the entirety of the conversation, now looks up at Phil, “Should I wake him up?”

He sounds incredibly reluctant about doing so.

Phil gives him a look.

“He’ll probably want to go home and sleep in his own bed, Wil.” Phil responds. His tone is full of fond exasperation.

“He doesn’t have a bed,” Techno pipes up, Wilbur and Phil now looking at him. “He sleeps on the sofa in the main room of his apartment.”

“He *sleeps* on that thing?” Wilbur hisses, looking completely disgusted. “How- how is he not falling apart?”

“It could account for how bad his posture is,” Phil comments, his own tone horrified as he stares at Tommy, looking like a very worried father.

“Phil, please can we let him stay? Just one night?” Wilbur pleads, making a pouting face.

“At least try waking him up once, just to see if he’d rather leave,” Techno pipes up now, watching Wilbur carefully.

The man huffs, but relents, looking down at Tommy to shake his shoulder lightly.

“Toms, Tommy, hey— wake up, buddy,” Wilbur says gently, shaking Tommy’s shoulder again until the boy stirs, lifting his head up a little bit keeping his eyes shut.

“Wh’ y’u wan’?” he slurs quietly, fisting his hand into the collar of Wilbur’s shirt, who seems completely *thrilled* about this situation. Black mail material, really.

“Come on, Toms, you gotta get up,” Wilbur murmurs again, despite the clear hesitance in his voice.

“No,” Tommy mutters, pressing further into Wilbur’s arms, “Sleep... nice. Warm.”

Wilbur shoots Phil a look that screams *can I keep him?* and the man sighs, dragging a hand down his face and standing up.

“I’ll go set the guest room up, then,” Phil hums, sending a very small smile in his son’s direction before heading down the hallway.

“You’re such a sap,” Techno says to Wilbur immediately, watching his twin smile down at (with where this was going) their new brother.

“Shut up, Techno, you’re just jealous he didn’t lean on you.”

“No, I’m not. I wouldn’t want that gremlin droolin’ on me,” Techno responds with a grimace.

“Sure, sure.”

Phil returns shortly after, peeking his head around the corner to signal for Wilbur to follow.

The man slowly stands, gathering Tommy up into his arms. The kid shifts against him so that his head is leaning against Wilbur’s chest, curls smushed into the fabric and his face hidden away into Wilbur’s cow-patterned jumper.

Techno follows not too far behind, having shut the television off.

Upon entering the small guest bedroom, Wilbur notices that the ecosystem that he’d collected earlier that day with Tommy has been deposited on the bedside table (he had left it by accident in his bedroom).

He smiles softly at it before carefully setting Tommy down onto the soft bed, tucking the boy in and pulling the sheets up to the kid’s chin.

(He had a hard time trying to unlatch the kid’s hand from how tightly it was holding onto his sweater, but he managed... with Techno’s help).

After he’s tucked in, Tommy curls up on his side and blearily opens his eyes a little, murmuring a little “Ay’p, Wilby” before letting them flutter close again.

Techno snickers from the doorway right behind Wilbur, but the man stands stick still, and he's glitching all over again, trying to process the nickname that the gremlin gave him.

Wilbur reaches out, slowly running a hand through Tommy's curls, and the boy leans into it heavily, a small smile on his face in his sleep while Wilbur continues to card his fingers through the boy's hair.

(Through his *brother's* hair, a voice reminds him in a way that sounds protective. He tries to ignore it).

"Let's leave him be, Wil," Phil says gently, putting a hand on Wilbur's shoulder and steering him out of the guest bedroom, the man's face falling in a bit of a pout, "With what Techno told me about the sofa he uses as a bed, the poor kid probably needs his sleep, anyways."

Wilbur can't disagree with that.

## Chapter End Notes

tommy: i'm tired i don't want to move everything hurts i won't call tubbo cuz i don't want to go anywhere. i will simply suffer

wilbur: hey tommy wanna hang out

tommy: absolutely let's go

^ this also mirrors my own reaction to writing this chapter btw lmao

me, yesterday, burnt out, one foot in the grave: im gonna take a break. i cant write physically

me, today after receiving crimeboys content: \*writes the longest chapter of this fic yet\*



no but seriously i might take a break now bc sheesh i didn't expect to write that much.  
and it's all fluff with minor angst??? what??

**author rant below ! feel free to skip over <3**

fun fact my favourite studio ghibli movie is *Howl's Moving Castle* and the design for wilbur's villain outfit is heavily inspired by howl's outfit in general (especially the big jacket part).

also i was checking twitter today and the song i recommended a couple chapters back (the cover of 'its cold outside' by toxic & wilbur) is now on spotify. i'm so fucking excited & have added it to *so* many playlists lmao

on a completely unrelated note, i've read so many fae fics that i really want to write my own..... i have a decent idea for one. i am so tempted

# this place feels like home

## Chapter Summary

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Tommy grumbles, pushing his key into the lock and twisting it until there’s a soft *click*. “I, uhm... really enjoyed the Ghibli movies.”

“You’re welcome back anytime,” Wilbur says with a sweet tone that promises nothing but the truth.

“You can come back whenever you want, kid,” Techno adds on to solidify the promise.

Tommy smiles a little to himself and opens his apartment door, “Well, uhm... thanks. I guess. I’ll be seeing you, then.”

or, tommy goes “home”, another sadly short filler chapter of crimeboys & bedrock bros & 4/4 sbi

## Chapter Notes

haha deez nuts

---

**TWs:** self-hatred, minor derealization, mild possessive behaviour, mentions of depression & loneliness

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Tommy wakes up, it is to something extremely comfortable and warm, a feeling that on its own is completely alien to him.

He almost doesn't want to open his eyes to the sight of his familiar and unforgiving apartment, to let himself sink further into the embrace of a warm mattress and pillows, to snuggle back underneath the blanket thrown over him and allow himself to succumb back to sleep, but...

Sunlight shines into his eyes when he rolls over, just barely but enough for him to realize he's probably slept too long, and he opens his eyes just a tad to look at the pale curtains hanging over windows in the bedroom he had nearly forgotten staying in.

And then everything clicks and Tommy sits bolt upright, eyes wide as he runs his fingers over the soft comforter that had been pulled up to his chin, head craning around the room he doesn't recognize, catching sight of a familiar jar of dirt and water sitting on the bedside table.

He calms, but only a little, as he's reminded that he's in Wilbur's house and must've accidentally fallen asleep the night before (he flushes with embarrassment at this; he hates falling asleep around others. It makes him feel vulnerable).

Getting up slowly from the bed, Tommy makes his way through the bedroom (his limbs don't ache like they did the day before, and he feels well rested for the first time in *years*, but that comes with a lingering exhaustion from having slept so long that weighs his shoulders down, but he thinks that it's a *good* tired instead of a bad one).

Creeping out into the hallway, he realizes how strangely silent the penthouse is. Normally he wakes up to cars honking, neighbours yelling, something crashing or a weird banging noise, but there's nothing except for the birds chirping outside the large window that basks him in a gentle light through the crack in the curtains.

Tommy goes closer, pulling the blinds back a little, his breath nearly being taken away at the trees entangling branches and coloured flowers weaving through the wood just outside the window, almost as though an orchard is growing against the penthouse (*mansion*, he reminds himself).

A black bird flutters into Tommy's view, landing elegantly on a branch and then looking up at the boy from the tree, head tilted as if silently curious about Tommy's actions, its beady eye watching the boy carefully.

Tommy smiles a little and carefully puts his hand up to the glass of the window, just as he had yesterday in the large library, and the bird flutters closer, landing on the windowsill just on the other side of the glass, ruffling its feathers and not taking its eyes off of Tommy.

It's beautiful, and Tommy tries to recall if he accidentally died the night before or something and now he's finally able to breathe, until there's a gentle clamoring up the steps that shatters his peaceful moment.

"Oh," Techno says, standing at the top of the stairs, looking at Tommy with a blank expression. He's wearing sweatpants and a nightshirt, and Tommy has to resist the urge to laugh because normally the man is so dressed up, and it's pretty funny seeing him in something so domestic as that. "You're up."

"Nice sweatpants," Tommy smirks, Techno huffing a little.

"You're literally wearing *Wilbur's* clothes," Techno comments, the corner of his mouth twitching when Tommy's face falls, "You have no say in this matter."

"Well- you-" Tommy splutters, but Techno interrupts him.

"Phil's made crepes. You gonna come eat some or just continue to bully me at this ungodly hour?"

Tommy narrows his eyes at the man.

(He's never had crepes before, but he doesn't want to say that).

“Let’s just go downstairs, prick.”

---

The second Tommy reaches the kitchen, he halts in the doorway, eyes wide as he examines the pure amount of food on the countertop.

There are plates of fruit (varying from strawberries, blueberries, and bananas), jars of peanut butter, honey, and some strange brown jar Tommy’s never seen before, a plate full of eggs mixed with cheese and sausage, and finally a tin cylindrical thing that looks a little bit like a large version of the salt shakers in Nook’s.

“What the fuck is this?” Tommy whispers reverently, glancing from Techno (who has taken a seat at the kitchen table), to Wilbur, who is standing beside Phil at the sink, watching Tommy look over everything with some strange smug smirk on his face.

“It’s the stuff for the crepes, mate,” Phil pipes up, smiling warmly at Tommy from where he’s washing a mug off in the sink.

“The... the *what*?” Tommy repeats, tilting his head a little, and the cat’s let out of the bag immediately, Wilbur looking like he’s personally offended.

“Have you never had a crepe before?” Wilbur asks, raising an eyebrow and walking over to Tommy to shove a porcelain plate in his hands.

Tommy glares at him (but is more focused on holding the plate in his hands with a death grip so he doesn’t accidentally drop and smash it), “No, I haven’t had a fucking crepe, do I look like a rich person to you? Prick. Don’t have to go *rubbing it in*, you privileged bitch.”

Wilbur snorts, rolling his eyes and putting his hands on Tommy's shoulders, leading him around the kitchen and positioning him right in front of a press pan that almost... looks like a strange waffle maker? Or maybe that panini maker that Quackity had in his old apartment?

(Tommy is suddenly starving — Quackity usually makes the best paninis).

“I'll help you make it, then!” Wilbur says enthusiastically, reaching over Tommy to grab a rubber bowl full of what looks like pancake mix, pouring it into the presser and then pulling the lid down.

Tommy watches, interest piqued for no reason, as Wilbur waits for a few moments and then opens the lid, gently pulling the very flat pancake from the presser and sliding it onto Tommy's plate.

He then leads Tommy back through the kitchen towards where the plates full of food start, guiding him through each thing and helping him put it onto the crepe itself.

Tommy had tried to smear the strange brown stuff onto the crepe by himself (after Wilbur nearly had a breakdown when Tommy said he didn't know what it was and said he 'had to try it'), but nearly tore a hole into the fragile pancake type thing.

So really, Wilbur ended up making the damn thing, teasing Tommy the entire time as if he were a tiny baby man or just a small child.

(Tommy ended up elbowing him harshly in the side and doing the rest himself, nearly dumping the entirety of the salt shaker onto his food after Wilbur said it was 'powdered sugar' or whatever).

In the end, Tommy's got a plate full of cheesey eggs mixed with sausage, a crepe full of bananas and the strange Nutella stuff, and even a slice of fucking toast that Wilbur said *he had to eat or else*.

(Ominous dickhead).

Sitting next to Techno, Tommy picks up a fork and pokes at his food again, glancing up only when Phil and Wilbur take their seats at the table as well.

He averts his eyes and takes a piece of the crepe off with his fork, plopping it into his mouth and...

Holy shit, that's good.

Just like the night before, Tommy nearly chokes at how quickly he eats breakfast, ignoring the sounds of laughter and chuckles coming from all sides of the table.

"Wilbur, what was that stuff?" Tommy asks once his plate is clean, looking at Wilbur curiously, who is finishing up his portion of eggs.

He doesn't have to elaborate on what he means because Wilbur's got this smug look on his face that says he knows *exactly* what Tommy was inferring to.

"Nutella," Wilbur responds simply, and Tommy's face falls.

"I ate something named after *nuts*?"

---

It's when Tommy's sitting on the counter in the kitchen (trying to avoid asking Phil if he wants help washing dishes for the *tenth* time, because he's already been denied the times before that), when Techno walks in, leaning against the doorway.

“Are you ready to go home, kid?” Techno asks, watching Tommy with careful eyes and...

A feeling of dread enters the pit of Tommy’s stomach, and he looks away from Techno, clenching his jaw.

Of course, he wants to go home. Back to his small apartment with nothing but a sofa and a broken window (that the fucking *Blade* still hasn’t fixed, damn him), back to the place where his beloved Oswald is...

But he also... doesn’t.

He doesn’t want to go back to a place with empty walls, that smells of mildew and wakes him up at ungodly hours in the morning to someone shouting or traffic, with doors that creak in a way that almost feels like they’re making fun of him, with a cracked mirror that he can’t bear to look in...

He’d rather stay here, where everything feels warm all the time and the sunlight actually lights up every corridor and everything looks so *vibrant* and not so *gray*, and he actually feels (even if just a little bit) wanted. A place where he isn’t alone, a place where he can smile and not feel like it’s forced.

But he has to go home, and he *knows* he does, because while it *would* be nice to stay here another night, he knows he isn’t welcome, and he knows they would hate him if they looked at him for a little too long, that they’d toss him to the wolves the second they realized who (or *what*) he is.

So Tommy smiles up at Techno meekly and mumbles, “I’m ready when you are, big man.”

---

Tommy slinks against the back seat of Techno’s sports car, his arms wrapped around himself.



Phil had done his laundry for him, washed and dried his wet clothes that smelled of pond water, and he was able to change back into them before he left (reluctantly handing a pair of folded clothes, the orca socks on top, back to Wilbur, who looked just as hesitant to take them back).

He nuzzles into the hood of his own jumper, and realizes with a nice feeling that echoes through his body that it doesn't smell like him in the slightest, but rather like what he smelt echoing throughout the entire Craft household; something he couldn't name, a little bit floral, but also clean.

(It smelled like his hair, too, and the very thought nearly brought Tommy to tears).

When the car pulls to a stop, Tommy trudges out of the door (making sure he opens it with his hand in his sleeve so that he doesn't dirty it with fingerprints), Wilbur and Techno following close behind as he reluctantly walks up the steps of his four-story, multi-apartment complex.

(It looked more like an American *motel*, if you asked Tommy).

When Tommy reaches his front door and shakily pulls his keys from his pocket, he turns and smiles up at the men that watch him with saddened expressions, as though *they* don't want him to leave, either.

(The very sight nearly has Tommy in tears so he quickly snorts and turns away, refusing to look back at them).

"Thank you for your hospitality," Tommy grumbles, pushing his key into the lock and twisting it until there's a soft *click*. "I, uhm... really enjoyed the Ghibli movies."

"You're welcome back anytime," Wilbur says with a sweet tone that promises nothing but the truth.

“You can come back whenever you want, kid,” Techno adds on to solidify the promise.

Tommy smiles a little to himself and opens his apartment door, “Well, uhm... thanks. I guess. I’ll be seeing you, then.”

“Bye Tommy,” Techno says, and Tommy can hear the man pause before walking away, footsteps echoing against the walls.

Tommy can almost feel the tears coming but he forces himself to turn around when Wilbur whispers for him to, voice nearly as gentle as his eyes when he sees Tommy turn with his nose all shriveled, holding back tears.

(If Wilbur notices, he doesn’t say anything).

“What’re you still doing here, prick?” Tommy asks, narrowing his eyes a little.

“Oh, uh,” Wilbur glances down, and then pulls something from behind his back; a jar of water and dirt and tiny little animals swimming around in it, along with a plate wrapped in tinfoil. “I just wanted to give this to you.”

Tommy stares at both items, before backing up and motioning for Wilbur to come inside silently, the man smiling gratefully before stepping into the apartment, immediately setting the plate of food down onto the counter before pushing the jar into Tommy’s hands.

“You were upset I stole your pond water,” Wilbur begins, and he sounds almost embarrassed about something, “But I’ve decided just to give it back to you. So you could have your pond with you at all times or something, without having to actually visit it.”

Tommy stares down at the jar in his hands, an overwhelming feeling pouring over him, and he *has* to make Wilbur leave his apartment before he does genuinely start sobbing.

“Leave,” Tommy whispers, sounding choked, and Wilbur’s face falls a little, slinking out the door.

Tommy follows close behind and grabs the man by his sweater sleeve, making him halt in the doorway, before shoving the jar right back into Wilbur’s arms, as if they had been playing hot potato with it the whole time.

“It’s yours, Wil,” he mutters, watching the tiny figures swirl around in the water, “I want you to have it... think of it like, uhm, I’m paying you back for the axolotl or something.”

There’s a second of silence, and then Tommy mumbles, “And uh, I named it *Pogtopia*... so if you’re gonna keep it, you *have* to call it that, or uh, I’ll clart you to death.”

He doesn’t see it, but he can definitely hear the big smile in Wilbur’s voice as the man says, “Thank you, Tommy.”

And then the door shuts, and he’s gone.

---

Tommy has to hold himself back from calling out into the empty space of his apartment, “*Hey, I’m home!*” and get a response that’s just as eager as his is, to see someone peek their head out from around the corner with a smile plastered on their face because Tommy’s *here* and he’s back home, but...

Nobody comes.

The apartment is the same as the way he’d left it; Oswald swims around in his tank (he takes the opportunity to feed him now), his sofa is still the same beaten up old thing it always has been, and there is no feeling of *someone else* in this place.

(Plus the new addition of whatever was in that plate with tinfoil atop).

There's just... *him*.

(Something yearns to go back to Wilbur's house, to be back around people who *seem* to care about him, to be in a house that doesn't feel so empty and claustrophobic at the same time...)

(But he ignores it, because why shouldn't he, when he knows that everyone that he ever cares about ends up just leaving anyways?)

If nothing else, at least Oswald will stay.

## Chapter End Notes

i finished undertale & cried like a *baby* so i have decided to write more angst in my short break.

apologies for the short chapter!! i promise the next one will be a bit longer :) also, lmk if u would rather see crimeboys, bedrock bros, or angelduo content <3 (it's important for the next chap lmao)

i know this chapter is short but! i bring a gift! and by gift i mean i actually wrote the fae fic i was talking about lmao. the link is here: [my fae fic!](#)

feel free to read, or don't, up to u <3 :) i had fun with faeries, implied dadbur, hybrids & glittery writing for 12k words aha

**obligatory author rant, feel free to skip <3**

yes, i did play the true pacifist ending of undertale, anyone who plays the genocide run is a monster /lh /hj

here's a link to wilbur soot's cover of kmd by american poetry club because it makes me happy: [link](#) :) /safe

now time to return to my break lmao

# the calm before the storm, or whatever the hell it is

## Chapter Summary

Yeah. He feels *content*.

He smiles a little despite himself, despite the guilt he'd shoved away, despite the way he knows this won't last forever.

It's nice to feel this way, to feel as though someone cares about you (even if just a little).

And if there's a part of his head screaming at him, reminding him that this never lasts, that it always goes wrong because he's *Tommy* and his luck has always been shit... he ignores it.

Just for now, he will let himself feel content.

or, more soft 4/4 content because family dynamics make me very upset )):

## Chapter Notes

wilbur arg my beloved <3

---

**tws!:** derealization, mentions of disordered eating/ED, mentions of dying, heavy cursing, mild possessiveness (ALL PLATONIC, FUCKERS), uhm... i think that's all, but pls let me know if i forgot anything :)

*It's so cold.*

*The snow was pretty today.*

*At least that's the last thing Tommy will know before he dies.*

---

"You're here early," Phil says with a chuckle, keys jangling as he unlocks the front door to the bookstore, looking at Tommy curiously out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah, well," Tommy mumbles, wrapping his arms around himself tightly, hands shifting up and down them to warm himself up a little. "I like getting up early, what can I say?"

"Not many young people do," Phil says with a hum, smirking when Tommy snorts at that comment, following the man into the bookstore once he's got the door opened.

"That's not true, you're just making shit up 'cuz you're *old*," Tommy mutters tiredly, the tension in his shoulders relaxing a little as he walks into the bookstore, a rush of warm air combatting the cold that he'd been standing in for a while outside.

"I'm not that old, though?" Phil says, sounding exasperated but amused, putting his keys into his pockets and flicking the lights on. It sounds more like a question, in Tommy's humble opinion. "I'm only *thirty-six*, holy shit."

"Yikes, you don't think that's old?" Tommy sucks in air through his teeth, before it's stanchied by a yawn.

He settles down into his chair at the front desk, plopping his chin into his hands, forcing down yet another yawn, "I worry for what will happen when your children have to put you in a fuckin' home some day and you'll still be thinking thirty-six isn't old as shit."

Phil bursts into laughter, the kind where it's all high pitched and makes even Tommy smile despite being incredibly exhausted.

(Maybe he missed Phil, maybe he didn't... all he knew was how incredibly lonely that tiny apartment could get without anyone around. It was something he hadn't quite realized much until recently).

"You little shit," Phil says, shaking his head and patting Tommy's shoulder lightly, heading towards his office at the back of the store, "I can clearly see how you get along with my boys so well."

Tommy huffs, yawning once again.

"I wouldn't exactly say we 'get along'," he grumbles, more to himself, turning his head to look out the big window beside the front desk, watching the world slowly light up, the sky turning a delicate orange from blue.

Tommy's always liked watching the sunrise, how the delicate light blue of the sky slowly switches to pinks and oranges and then an even brighter blue once the sun had fully risen.

There's a creak of a door and then Phil's walking back over towards him, carrying two mugs in his hands.

Tommy frowns at him, squinting at the mugs; one is decorated with a painted sunflower on the side and the other has a tiny stuffed bear with a ribbon around its neck.

Tommy makes a face at the steam coming up from the mugs, watching as Phil sets the sunflower coffee mug on the counter right in front of him, smiling kindly.



“You’re giving me caffeine?” Tommy asks in disbelief, poking the coffee mug warily, as if it were some sort of trap.

“What? Haven’t you had coffee before?” Phil chuckles a little, taking a sip of his own coffee, “Wil told me you work at a café for your other part time job, don't you get free coffee there or something?”

Tommy snorts a little at the thought, carefully taking the coffee mug in his hands, shivering a little at the warmth against the palms of his hands.

The very thought of Sam letting him drink caffeine was pretty hilarious; he’s certain the man would get gray hairs at the very idea of Tommy even a few *inches* away from a caffeinated drink.

Tommy decides that he will drink this coffee just to spite him. Not for any other reason, of course.

“What kind of business would it be if it gave you free coffee?” Tommy hums in response, looking at the coffee in his mug, swirling the light coloured liquid around a bit.

At least Phil knew not to give him fucking *black coffee*. *He’d probably have to quit his job if that were the case.*

*“I used to work at a café, back before I bought this place,” Phil says, leaning against the counter now, the two of them watching the sun spilling in through the large windows as it comes up from the horizon.*

*Tommy resists the urge to laugh at the way Phil phrases it as if trying to say ‘Back in my day’ in a less old person way.*

*“My boss let me have free pastries, not just coffee,” Phil adds, and Tommy rolls his eyes.*

*“Lucky you,” Tommy grimaces a little at Phil, making his tone as patronizing as possible, before gingerly taking a sip of his coffee.*

*Phil grins at the expression on the boy’s face.*

*“It’s good, right?” he asks, looking eager for Tommy’s reply.*

*“Fuck you,” Tommy responds sweetly, taking another sip of the coffee. Damn Phil and his ability to make good fucking coffee and food.*

*Phil snorts, and then there’s silence, the two watching the sunrise through the glass windows peacefully, and Tommy feels... if nothing else, a little bit more calm than he had earlier that morning.*

*“Where do you go for lunch breaks?” Phil asks suddenly, breaking the silence, and Tommy frowns at the man for what feels like the hundredth time that morning.*

*He’s too tired to have conversations like this, honestly.*

*“That’s kind of a weirdchamp question, big man,” he responds.*

*“I didn’t mean it to be,” Phil reassures with a slight grin, particularly at the usage of the word ‘weirdchamp’, “I just haven’t been around the shop much as of late and wasn’t sure if you actually even left for your lunch breaks.”*

*Tommy narrows his eyes a little, resisting the urge to yell at the man and call him out on his absolute bullshit.*

*It is true; he didn't usually leave for lunch breaks the way Karl tended to do. Normally he just ate later at Nook's when Sam forced him to eat at least an apple or something (if that counted for what Phil had mentioned early about the "free items privilege" coming with working at a bakery, Tommy had no idea).*

*"I'll take that as a no, then," Phil says smugly, and before Tommy can even rebuttal, he continues, "So, I was thinking then... how would you like to go on a lunch break with me instead?"*

*"What?" Tommy's eyes widen in interest; Phil, his boss, the guy whose house is probably the largest in all of Manberg, wants to treat him to lunch? Is he still fucking dreaming? What timeline is this? "You want to treat me to lunch? Seriously?"*

*Phil snickers a little, "Yes, I do, Tommy. Why are you acting so surprised?"*

*"It's not normal for someone to treat their employees to lunch, dumbass," Tommy states simply, taking another swig of the coffee. He makes a mental note to ask Phil for more coffee tomorrow, then deletes it. He shouldn't ask for too much, really.*

*(Phil already did enough for him by allowing him to sleep at his fucking house of all things — the memory of probably eating too much of Phil's food makes a pool of guilt gnaw at his already empty stomach and he decides to just shelf it off for later, as he has been doing with many things recently).*

*"You're not just 'some employee', Tommy," Phil says, gazing fondly at the boy, "I don't normally let just some random employee stay the night at my house, you know."*

*When Tommy doesn't respond to that, Phil adds, "Wil and Tech might come to lunch too, if you'd like that."*

*"Ew, why would you invite them?" Tommy quips immediately, raising his eyebrows as he takes another long drink from his coffee, and Phil chuckles again.*

*The guy laughs a lot — it's something Tommy's beginning to realize (not that he minds, really. He likes making people laugh).*

*"Fine, then, they aren't invited," Phil reassures with a sharp grin, setting his mug on the counter. "It'll just be you and me, kiddo. If that's alright with you."*

*Tommy freezes a little, staring at the liquid in his mug. That's... another person who has started to call him "kiddo".*

*Not that it bothers him or anything.*

*"Just you and me, then," Tommy says with a tiny smile, refusing to look up at Phil, wrapping his hands around his mug again, despite how cold the glass is now that he's drank most of the contents.*

---

*Wilbur flops down on the sofa, groaning a bit with his hair ruffled.*

*"I can't believe those fucking heroes," he whines, rolling over onto his back and glaring at the ceiling, tapping the plaster pressed over the bridge of his nose with a flicker of sadness on his face, "Always coming out of fucking nowhere."*

*Techno snorts, shutting the novel in his hands and turning to his brother, flicking him in the forehead, "Must you take up the whole sofa, Wilbur?"*

*"Don't you have any sympathy for me, brother mine?" Wilbur complains, frowning when Techno goes to flick him again, batting the man's hands away from his hairline angrily. "Stop fucking flicking me."*

*“Nope,” Techno’s grin is sharp, “You always rephrase that when you come home all hurt from patrol, knowing full well what my answer will be each time.”*

*“Yeah, yeah, go on and hide how soft you really are, Techno,” Wilbur tilts his head back to smirk at his brother, who just raises an elegant eyebrow at him. “You and I both know full well about what you did to that fucking dick Morpheus when he cut my face up a couple months ago.”*

*“What I did?” Techno snorts, rolling his eyes, “You’re the one who blew up the whole building, you arsonist.”*

*“Hey, can’t blame me for wanting to hide the evidence,” Wilbur hums, but his tone is dark at the memory, and he tilts his head forwards again so he can stare at the ceiling. “Do you think Phil would let us get glow in the dark stars for the living room?”*

*“What?”*

*“I’m gonna order them off of Amazon,” Wilbur decides, and Techno just decides not to respond to that. At this point, his brother’s just talking to himself.*

*They sit in silence for a couple moments, and then Wilbur shuffles a little uncomfortably, murmuring, “Do you ever think about... them?”*

*“About who, Wil?”*

*“You know exactly who I’m referring to.”*

*Techno exhales a little, opening the novel again, forcibly trying to escape this conversation topic as best as he can, tucking a piece of pink hair behind his pointed ear.*

*(How it remains even slightly pointed despite him wearing the suppressor, he will never understand; Wilbur's always thought it to be pretty cool).*

*"Not really, no," Techno admits, even though it's only partially a lie. If he does think about it, it really isn't by his own accord.*

*(The voices are rarely ever quiet when he isn't wearing the suppressor, which is why he wears it every chance he gets).*

*Wilbur just hums, twirling one of the curls in front of his face around a finger absentmindedly, and there's silence around the room again despite the random song that Wilbur continues to hum and the gentle turning of paper pages from Techno.*

*It's interrupted a little too soon when Wilbur's phone rings and the man flinches a little, glaring at the contact name as if it personally wronged him.*

*"Hey, Phil," Wilbur says coolly, leaning back down into the sofa cushions, picking at a thread on his sweater, before smiling a little. "The gremlin wants to go to lunch with us, you say?"*

*Techno rolls his eyes. He can practically hear the prideful fucking glee in Wilbur's voice, the pretentious prick.*

*"Well tell him we will be there," Wilbur says, a sharp grin on his face. Techno makes a mental note to remind him of the emerald necklace before he leaves to have lunch with Tommy.*

*(He tunes out the 'we' part in particular. No way in hell he's going socializing again when that child stayed at their house a couple days ago).*

*Wilbur shuts his phone off and then tilts his head up to look at Techno again, who peeks at him from around his book, frowning at the weird expression on his face.*

*Then it clicks and Techno's frown deepens.*

*"No," Techno says immediately, looking back down at his book. He already made his decision on this.*

*"I didn't even say anything!"*

*"I know what you're goin' to ask, Wil, and the answer is still no."*

*"You're such a killjoy," Wilbur complains, "Won't you come with? I'm sure that Tommy would like to see you."*

*"How is that supposed to make me want to go?"*

*"I dunno," Wilbur hums, feigning ignorance, "Maybe he wants to hear some more about... I don't know... Greek mythology...? Perhaps you could tell him a fun little story about fuckin'... Aracnhid or whatever her name is."*

*"Arachne," Techno corrects.*

*Wilbur grins at him.*

*Techno glares right back.*

*Touché.*

---

*Tommy settles down in the booth at the diner, slinking up against the window that displays a pretty good view of the main plaza in Manberg (a place he actively tries to avoid), pulling his sweater more tightly around himself and wishing he'd worn a hoodie.*

*(If he had, he'd be able to pull his hoodie up and hide his face from people that he really would rather not see at the moment).*

*Phil takes a seat on the other side of Tommy, setting down his green and white bucket hat on the table and retying his hair into a tiny ponytail with that green ribbon Tommy's grown so accustomed to seeing.*

*"Why did you choose this fucking diner?" Tommy mumbles, glaring at Phil out of the corner of his eye, who looks up from where he'd been brushing his fingers through his ponytail again.*

*There's a lingering 'out of all places', but it goes unsaid.*

*"Why? Don't like 'old people' diners?" Phil jokes, and Tommy rolls his eyes.*

*"Obviously," Tommy hisses, even though he sinks a bit into the booth, putting his chin in his hand and glaring out the window. At least he's fortunate in one way — he knows that someone on the outside of the diner can't see inside.*

*(That doesn't mean that the people who walk in can't see him, though).*

*They sit in mostly silence (filled with the buzzing sound of people talking in the background and plates clattering in the kitchen).*

*His few moments of solace are only interrupted when someone plops on the seat next to him, causing Tommy to flinch so hard that he hits his head on the window he was leaning up*



*against.*

*Tommy turns to send a seething glare at the perpetrator, and it only worsens when he sees who it was.*

*“What the fuck?!” He hisses at Wilbur, who is beaming at him with sparkling eyes and laughing as Tommy pushes himself further up against the window to get as far away from the man as he can, “Do you fucking- do you live and breathe to scare the shit out of me, you asshole?”*

*“Yes,” Wilbur states simply, grin only widening more when Tommy smacks him in the arm.*

*“What’re you even doing here, anyways, you tory?” Tommy grumbles, turning to glower at Phil, who is purposely chatting with Techno to avoid Tommy’s glare. “I don’t remember inviting you.”*

*(He had remembered quite the opposite, actually).*

*Techno, who had sit uncomfortably across from Tommy (taking Phil’s spot, the asshole), also actively avoids the boy’s gaze.*

*“Phil called and said that you wanted to have lunch with us,” Wilbur says with a smirk, reaching out to ruffle Tommy’s hair, making the boy slap his hands away aggressively. “That just makes me wonder if you missed me, Toms.”*

*Then Wilbur coos, and suddenly he’s reaching out, “Aww, Tommyyy, did you miss your older brother Wilbur?”*

*Tommy’s going to stab him.*

*He was going to order a steak or something just so he could stab Wilbur with the knife it came with.*

*“No, no, no, I did not fucking miss you, I just saw you two days ago, you fucking dick,” Tommy seethes, despite the way his heart lifts a little when Wilbur snorts and leans back against the back cushion. “Don’t put words in my mouth, you bitch, I never missed you. I don’t miss anyone, everyone always misses me.”*

*(If he was being honest, he definitely had missed them all — for the past couple of days since coming back home, he had felt sort of... empty. As though he were missing something. But he’d rather die than admit this to them of all people).*

*“Aww, Tommy, I know you missed me, you can admit it, you know,” Wilbur jokes, poking Tommy in the forehead.*

*“Don’t fuckin’ poke me, you prick!”*

*“Not until you admit that you missed me!”*

*“I didn’t miss you, holy shit!”*

*Wilbur makes a pouting expression, wrapping an arm around Tommy’s shoulders and pulling him close to his side so he can ruffle the boy’s curls easier, who begins hissing at Wilbur like a feral raccoon.*

*“Let go of me, you fucking clingy bitch,” Tommy grumbles out, trying to duck down and leave Wilbur’s grasp, before whining and turning to Phil, who is watching the scene with his hand covering his mouth, “Phhhlllll, please make your fucking spawn let go of me before I suffocate and die!”*

*Phil snorts, looking at the two fondly, “Wil, please don’t harm my best working employee.”*

*“Yeah, Wil, you— wait, I'm your best working employee—?”*

*“That’s not fair,” Wilbur complains despite letting go of Tommy (but keeping his arm stretched across the back of the booth). His face falls a tad, “Tommy has way too much power over Phil. This is horrible. His dad instincts can’t seem to ever shut off.”*

*“That’s nice comin’ from you,” Techno chimes in gruffly, earning a sharp look from Wilbur.*

*“Fuck all of you,” Tommy says, before turning to his boss, his voice lilting a tad, “Except Phil, for he has saved me and proved himself to be the biggest man. He also complimented me, which just makes him superior.”*

*“Aw, thanks, mate,” Phil smiles at him kindly, despite the way Wilbur makes a sad noise beside Tommy.*

*“Am I no longer the favourite?” Wilbur complains, wrapping his arms around Tommy, who just sinks into them with a deadpan look to his face.*

*He’s given up on trying to escape Wilbur’s clingy clutches at this point.*

*“You were never the favourite,” Tommy tells him flatly, resisting the urge to smirk when Wilbur gasps in offense.*

*“Ha, L,” Techno speaks up from the other side of the booth.*

*“Fuck off, Techno.”*

*“You’re the one who forced me here, Wil.”*

*“Yeah, well, now I want you gone.”*

*“Some awesome family dynamic you guys have got going on here,” Tommy grumbles, earning another chuckle from Phil.*

*“You’re basically part of the dynamic by this point, mate,” Phil says with raised eyebrows.*

*(That doesn’t make Tommy feel warm. Not at all).*

*“No, no, do not fucking say that, I simply don’t believe it,” Tommy says, elbowing Wilbur in the ribs consistently until the man finally frees him with a wheeze.*

*Speaking of fucked up family dynamics... Tommy frowns at the plaster sitting right underneath the wire of Wilbur’s dumb circular glasses.*

*“Wil, what the hell happened to your nose?”*

*“I got into a fight,” Wilbur says bluntly, casting a look at Techno and Phil.*

*“Yikes. Judging from your nose, I’m gonna assume you lost,” Tommy says with a smug grin.*

*Wilbur smiles sinisterly.*

*“You can assume that if you’d like.”*

*Oh.*

*Tommy inches away from him.*

---

*“You doing okay, kid?”*

*Tommy hums a little, looking up at Techno from where he'd been purposely looking at the ground to hide his face behind his curls as the group walked back to the bookstore.*

*“I'm fine,” he tells him. It's starting to feel pretty fucking robotic now, responding with that each time he's asked about how he is doing. As though when he says that it's more of a habitual response than anything else.*

*(At this point, it is).*

*Techno makes a humming noise, but makes sure to stick close to Tommy the rest of the way, walking particularly close to him, as though he can actually tell that with the way the kid's walking, he wants to go unseen by the crowds.*

*With how tall the guy is, he practically casts a shadow over Tommy, making it difficult to see him from afar.*

*For what has to be the first time in six (seven? eight? maybe longer) months, Tommy feels at least a twinge of confidence walking down the sidewalk in the plaza.*

*Tommy notes to thank Techno for it later.*

---

*Tommy's fiddling with a pen when someone knocks on the front counter, gaining his attention again. He was feeling pretty tired — having a decent meal for the first time since staying overnight at Phil's had done a number on him.*

*Eating that much made him feel... strange. Full, but not in a bad way; he had done his best to order the cheapest thing on the menu, and it was still filling. Not too filling, but... just enough.*

*(He still felt ill from it, but more tired than anything).*

*"What do you want, prick?" Tommy mutters, narrowing his eyes right at Wilbur, who is watching him with something smug on his stupid face.*

*Why is it that he always looks like he was just handed everything he wanted? Pretentious vampire dickhead.*

*"I was just coming over to see if you could help my dear brother Techno find a book," Wilbur muses, leaning across the counter, and Tommy shifts uncomfortably in his seat.*

*"I don't like what this entails," he admits, crossing his arms and leaning back in the chair to properly look at Wilbur, who just grins wider.*

*"It doesn't entail anything, Tommy," the man hums, standing up to his full height, making Tommy have to crane his neck to properly glare at him (never really making eye contact for too long; he hated staring into people's eyes). "He just needs help and... well, nobody knows their way around better than you do, Toms."*

*"Your father is literally the owner of the bookstore."*

*“He’s busy,” Wilbur waves his hand dismissively, tilting his head so that his curls fall into his eyes again, just barely covering the glasses positioned on his nose.*

*“Karl’s probably around somewhere,” Tommy tries again, raising an eyebrow when Wilbur just makes a sad face.*

*“Karl doesn’t know Eldritch Wings like you do, Toms.”*

*“Fuck is that supposed to mean? He’s worked here for longer than I have!”*

*Wilbur’s face falls even more.*

*Tommy stares at him.*

*There’s a pause.*

*“Fucking— holy shit, okay, but only because you’re like a brother to me or whatever, and I would be a shit pseudo-lil bro if I didn’t help you,” Tommy says as he aggressively gets up from his chair, pushing past the now positively beaming man to find a particular pink-haired guy. “Oh and because Techno’s the favourite.”*

*“I will cry,” Wilbur comments sweetly as he follows Tommy through the maze of bookshelves until they finally reach a particularly disgruntled looking Techno, who is gazing at a couple of books. “Wait—fuck do you mean, he’s the favourite? First I lose to Phil, now him—?”*

*Tommy ignores him, walking right up to Techno, choosing to feign ignorance at the sad noise Wilbur makes.*

*“So, Techno,” Tommy claps his hands together, putting his faux customer service smile on his face, “What do you need help with?”*

*“I was looking for more, uhm, Greek mythology books,” Techno admits, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly. It’s kinda funny, Tommy realizes, how out of place the guy looks with his abnormal height and yet he’s here looking for fucking Greek mythology novels of all things.*

*“Alright, well,” Tommy frowns a little, trying to think of a particular place that other mythology novels would be (still ignoring the way Wilbur pouts in the corner like a fucking anime character).*

*Then, he snaps his fingers and grins, “Oh! I recall seeing some pretty good ones hidden away upstairs when I was sitting up there a couple weeks ago or so...”*

*Tommy turns on his heel, then motions with his hand, feeling particularly excited now that he gets to go to his favourite part of Eldritch Wings, “Follow me?”*

*Techno nods, still looking particularly awkward as he follows Tommy towards the twirling iron steps onto the top floor of the bookstore, otherwise known as Tommy’s absolute favourite spot of Eldritch Wings, or even Manberg in general.*

*They pass by Karl, who is reading a book on one of the floors, and the man looks up to grin and wave enthusiastically at the two, before returning to skimming through a book with a purple front.*

*(Tommy’s sure that Karl has read that book five hundred times at this point. He has no clue what the hell the guy sees in it. He tried reading it once but it was just a bunch of ancient runes that made literally zero sense).*

*When they finally reach the top floor, Tommy leads Techno through the bookshelves until he reaches a particular one.*

*He takes a moment to scan it up and down, then pulls another one of the silver ladders from the end of the bookshelf towards the middle.*



*“Don’t fall off this time,” Techno jokes as Tommy scales up it.*

*“Ha, ha,” Tommy deadpans, pulling a book from the shelf and looking over the cover, before putting it back, “You’re just- you’re just so funny, Techno. Hilarious, truly. You should start your own comedy show or something.”*

*Techno snorts in amusement as Tommy pulls another book from the shelf and then scales down the ladder with it tucked under his arm.*

*“You look like a raccoon when you do that,” Techno says.*

*Tommy’s eye twitches. At this point, the guy’s just trying to piss him off.*

*Maybe he shouldn’t thank the fucker for earlier....*

*No, no. He’ll be nice.*

*Just this once.*

*For the sake of karma, or whatever the hell.*

*Tommy thrusts the book into Techno’s chest, gritting his teeth, “Here’s your fuckin’ book, bitch boy. Take it for free as thanks for... earlier.”*

*Techno raises an eyebrow, and the man’s face softens greatly.*

*“For free?” he says, his tone still flat but a little more gentle than before, “Phil owns the store, technically it’s always free.”*

*“I mean free from an insult, bitch, not a goddamn price,” Tommy seethes, running a hand through his curls and retreating from where they’re standing, heading down the hallway, hand skidding against the particularly creaky iron railing.*

*He leans against the railing and looks down at the trippy sight of bookshelves spiraling down the circular building down to the first floor. He can just barely see Wilbur standing in what Tommy remembers to be the poetry section.*

*He fucking called it. Wilbur Soot was one hundred percent a poetry man.*

*There’s movement beside him, and then Techno leans against the railing as well, book in hand, gazing carefully at the cover.*

*“Thanks for what?” the man mutters after a nice silence.*

*Must someone always break his few moments of quiet?*

*(He hopes there will always be someone to break it).*

*Tommy hums a little.*

*“Eh, just for, you know, walking with me I guess?” Tommy shrugs, unsure of how else to really phrase it.*

*There’s another pause. That tends to happen a lot with Techno around. Tommy finds that he doesn’t mind it.*

*(Maybe he even prefers it, not that he would ever admit that).*

*“I would’ve wanted the same if I were you,” Techno admits gruffly, and Tommy has to bite his tongue to not question the man further. “I hate socializing.”*

*There’s another awkward pause.*

*“What do you think Wilbur’s reading?” Tommy says instead of the questions that had been prickling at the end of his tongue.*

*Techno huffs a little, his constant display of amusement.*

*“Probably Edgar Allan Poe. He’s gotten into old poem dudes lately.”*

*“He said he didn’t read emo poetry!” Tommy whispers, aghast that he had been utterly lied to. “Can’t believe the Wilbur S- Craft lied to me. This is simply terrible. Now I must sue him for everything he owns.”*

*“He doesn’t read poetry, actually, but he wants to, uh…” Techno chuckles a little when he trails off, glancing at the boy before continuing, “He wants to live up to the standards that you’ve placed him in.”*

*Tommy’s nose wrinkles at this.*

*“The standards I’ve placed him in? Fuck does that even mean? You’re using big people words or whatever.”*

*“Well cuz you called him an ‘angsty poetry reader’ or whatever it was, he had this sudden inspiration to actually live up to that title. And I’m not using big people words, you’re just a child.”*

*“That... that’s fucking stupid,” Tommy whispers reverently, feeling a small prick of pride when Techno huffs again at this. “And I’m not a fucking child, how often do I have to remind you wankers that I’m eighteen?”*

*“Yeah, well... he really does care about you,” Techno admits gently, deciding not to comment on Tommy’s age, a silent confession that Techno definitely didn’t believe him.*

*(Not that Tommy cares. They’ll all be gone before they have a chance to find out what his age really is, anyways).*

*Tommy turns away from the man, clenching his jaw so hard that his teeth hurt in order for him not to potentially smile because Wilbur cared for him.*

*It was so fucking weird, how short of a time he had known the Craft family (minus Phil, obviously) and how quickly he had become... this attached.*

*It was also incredibly worrying, and he shelved the pool of extreme guilt that came with it for later, along with many other things.*

*For now...*

*He can feel the warmth of the sun on his back, basking in from the large bay window that is (and always will be) one of his favourite places in Manberg, the window that showcases more than half of the city’s rooftops.*

*Tommy feels... he’s not sure, really, what the word for it is.*

*Satisfied, maybe?*

*Then out of nowhere, there's a large hand ruffling his hair gently, ever so gently, as if he's fragile and the boy freezes for a moment before relaxing.*

*His eyes flick upwards for a moment at Techno, who won't look at him but from the side, the man's expression kind of looks the same way Tommy feels.*

*Contentment, Tommy thinks could be the right word.*

*Yeah. He feels content.*

*He smiles a little despite himself, despite the guilt he'd shoved away, despite the way he knows this won't last forever.*

*It's nice to feel this way, to feel as though someone cares about you (even if just a little).*

*And if there's a part of his head screaming at him, reminding him that this never lasts, that it always goes wrong because he's Tommy and his luck has always been shit... he ignores it.*

*Just for now, he will let himself feel content.*

## Chapter End Notes

tommy: \*calls wilbur his brother, thinks of techno like an older brother, thinks phil has dad tendencies\*

also tommy: fuck do u mean i'm part of the family dynamic ?

right so. i couldn't decide which ones to focus this chapter on the most so... i just decided to go with 4/4 lmao

(potential promises for benchtrio / alliumduo next chapter... maybe... *maybe*... no promises)

this chapter is kinda shit & i kinda hate it ngl bc it's a filler one but i hope it's alr all the same :) writer's block has me by the neck right now and it *sucks*

it's always funny trying to write wilbur and tommy because they r both so similar so writing their dialogue is like. writing the same person sometimes because they literally pick up each other's sayings. they are literally brothers i'm in shambles

anyways,  
my fucking mickey mouse google doc is crashing again ?!?! i need to make a third one  
i'm sobb i n g .

(holy shit?? 2k kudos?? thank u so much i'm gonna cry /pos, ily /p)

# you've fallen down, haven't you?

## Chapter Summary

you can tell i play too much undertale

## Chapter Notes

**TW!!:** derealization, self-deprecating thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*It's so cold...*

*Everything hurts.*

*He's alone.*

...

*Maybe this is what he deserves.*

*At least the snow was pretty today.*

## Chapter End Notes

apologies for this one.

(and no, this isn't going in the same route as tumosad went, i promise :) while i do enjoy making people cry, i'm a sucker for a happy ending).



# it's slime time babey

## Chapter Summary

“How are you feeling, Tommy?” he asks instead, and the kid continues to glower at him, looking even more irritated (if possible) at the question.

“Don’t start mother henning me, Phil,” Tommy says, getting up from the chair and blinking a little in confusion at Karl’s jacket being draped over him, before neatly folding it and placing it on the table with care, “I’m *fine*. I don’t know what it is with your entire family and thinking I’m some fucking *child* that can’t take care of themselves.”

“We’ve been over this,” Phil says, arms crossed but still maintaining a small smile, “I worry about *all* of my employees, Toms. It’s just not like you to fall asleep on the job.”

*(And you’re practically a part of the family now anyways, a part of him whispers).*

or, some plot progression (finally) /hj

or or, come get your gigglechampduo, angelduo, awesamdad, & alliumduo content :D

## Chapter Notes

i’m CATJAM ing so hard to pebble brain right now holy shit go listen to it rn

---

**tw’s!:** self-hatred/self deprecating thoughts, mentions of bruising & implied child abuse, mentions of disordered eating, & possessive behaviour (it’s all platonic, don’t be fucking weirdchamp!!). lmk if i forgot any <3 stay safe!!

“Are you sure you’re doing alright?”

Tommy glares angrily at the Blade, standing up straight to wipe trickling blood from his nose with the sleeve of his hoodie.

“Fuck do you care?” he snaps, and the Blade tilts his head to the side a little, and even if Tommy can’t *see* his eyes, he’s certain the man’s watching his every movement, as Tommy holds his nose closed and tips his head back to try and staunch the nosebleed.

“You’re off your game is all,” the Blade mutters, and Tommy actually laughs at that. Of course, he’s off of his fucking game. He has spent the last several nights absolutely *terrified* that the Bard was going to literally kill him if he walked home alone.

(It was quite a sickening irony when he remembered that the Blade himself was a part of the same “villain fraternity” that the Bard was in... as Tommy enjoyed calling it).

Obviously, Tommy couldn’t exactly *force* Techno or Wilbur to walk him home every night, even though he really wished he could. One of them volunteered most of the time, anyways, but last night had been the first night he’d gone home completely alone.

He had just about collapsed when he got home after dead bolting the door to the best of his ability, entire body shaking as though he’d just gotten off of a high speed roller coaster.

(Really, Tommy spent the rest of his night hunched up in the corner of the kitchen, having a shaky conversation with Oswald, who had proved to be a good listener).

“Fuck you,” Tommy decides to say sweetly to the Blade, who just holds his hands up in mock retreat as the boy straightens up again, bending down and picking up the wooden training sword.

It was pretty bullshit that they were still on the “using wooden swords” phase of training, but Tommy should’ve expected that sort of thing going into this, really.

At least after this, he won’t have to deal with the Blade’s shit anymore, or the sinking anxiety that came with potentially seeing the Bard *with* the guy again.

“This is our last fucking training session, anyways, so lets just get this shit over with,” Tommy grits out with that thought, hands clenching around the training sword.

The Blade continues to watch him for a moment before stepping forwards, getting into position with his sword held up. He almost looks like he regrets coming tonight.

Tommy feels a curl of confidence that maybe he does still live up to the standards of sword fighting.

“If you say so, kid,” Techno hums, head tilting.

Tommy narrows his eyes and rushes forwards, wooden sword held close to himself, prepared to strike, just the way he had been taught.

*He really can’t wait to just get out of this whole fucking thing.*

---

Tommy snores softly in the break room of Eldritch Wings, head buried in the middle of his crossed arms, Karl’s multicoloured hoodie draped over him, his blonde and red tufts of curls sticking up from underneath his arms.

Phil leans against the doorway, looking at the boy curiously, taking a sip of his coffee, debating if he should *really* wake him up or not — he knew it was probably not good for an employee of his to sleep on the job, but did he really care?

Tommy... he needed his sleep, that much was apparent. The kid rarely slept on the job, so if he was *this* exhausted, enough to actually knock him out, that said enough.

Phil hums a little to himself, watching the gentle rise and fall of Tommy's back as the boy rests, mind buzzing.

He can really see how Wilbur (and Techno, even, surprisingly) are fond of the boy. He's funny, he's reckless, he's just as erratic as they are, but... there's something about him that isn't quite right.

Something about the way the kid flinches at every noise, how he was so casual about his debt to Techno, about the bruises and bandages that line every bare piece of skin, even wrapping around his neck, stopping just halfway up.

There was something off about Tommy, and Phil knew that both Wilbur and Techno were determined to solve it, like a game of mystery waiting to be answered.

Phil, though, wasn't sure if they *should* get involved. After all, Tommy was perfectly of age (even if there was a part of Phil that screamed this wasn't true) and could probably take care of himself...

Tommy shifts in his sleep, and the boy lifts his head up a little, blonde waves falling into his eyes and a hand gingerly wiping them out of his face, eyes blinking blearily against the fluorescent lights in the break room, focusing on Phil, before his face scrunches up at seeing the man.

(There's a tiny braid tucked behind his ear from when Tommy had first arrived for work that day, coming in especially early again for some reason again, and Phil had offered to help him get a little bit of his hair out of his face. It was kind of funny how weirdly offended Tommy had looked at the offer, but how *happy* he had seemed afterwards).

“Fuck y’u doin’, Phil?” Tommy grumbles, rubbing at his eyes like a tired kitten, a hand ruffling his curls so that they aren’t so sleepridden. “Kinda- kinda fuckin’ *weird* of you to be watching me sleep, big man.”

Phil snorts a little, his heart sinking at how incredibly childish Tommy looks. It’s weird how he hadn’t really seen it as clearly before — sure, he had noticed when Wilbur and Techno brought the boy home sick, and when he’d stayed the night a couple days ago and fallen asleep against Wil, but now...

Now that he’s seeing him here all on his own, trying to scrub away the exhaustion that pulls him down, it’s all so apparent how *small* Tommy looks, with his slightly sunken in cheeks and bright blue eyes, clouded with fatigue, that continue to glare in his direction.

Had he just not seen it because of the bruises and plasters covering the boy’s body, could it have been the front that Tommy puts up to make himself appear more brash or “bigger”, or was it something else? How could he not have seen it the way he knew Wilbur and Techno had been the whole time?

He shoves the question building up in his throat down - he’s certain Tommy will just say he’s eighteen again anyways - and gives the boy a gentle smile.

“How are you feeling, Tommy?” he asks instead, and the kid continues to glower at him, looking even more irritated (if possible) at the question.

“Don’t start mother henning me again, Phil,” Tommy says, getting up from the chair and blinking a little in confusion at Karl’s jacket being draped over him, before neatly folding it and placing it on the table with care, “I’m *fine*. I don’t know what it is with your entire family and thinking I’m some fucking *child* that can’t take care of themselves.”

“We’ve been over this,” Phil says, arms crossed but still maintaining a small smile, “I worry about *all* of my employees, Toms. It’s just not like you to fall asleep on the job.”

*(And you’re practically a part of the family now anyways, a part of him whispers).*

Tommy flushes a little and sighs, running a hand down on his face, looking a bit ashamed, “I know, I know. I’m sorry, Phil. I- I can take an extra shift this Sunday to make up for it.”

Phil holds his hands up now, “No, no, I didn’t mean that at all in that way, Tommy. I’m not angry with you or anything, don’t worry about taking up another shift. I’m just worried for you is all.”

“No, but Phil, I need the money,” Tommy admits, averting his eyes and fiddling with one of the strings on Karl’s hoodie, “I’ll be here Sunday.”

“I’m still paying you the proper amount, mate,” Phil says, sounding strange, as though that was plainly obvious.

“I fell asleep on the job, though,” Tommy states, even though it sounds more like a question, looking at Phil in disbelief.

“It’s *alright*, Tommy,” Phil continues, tone gentle, as though he were speaking to one of his sons, smiling, “I don’t mind. Karl can handle the bookstore for thirty minutes on his own, it’s not a big deal. Plus, you need your sleep.”

Tommy huffs, looking for a moment like he might argue but deciding not to, picking the folded hoodie up from the table and walking past Phil towards the exit of the break room.

“Has Karl left yet?” he asks, clearly wanting to change the subject.

“Not yet,” Phil says with a strained smile this time, watching Tommy with a spark of worry settling in his stomach, burying the instinct to reach out and tell Tommy he’s okay. He now understands how Techno and Wilbur feel, but he doesn’t act on it, instead adding, “If you hurry, you can catch him.”

Tommy nods silently and walks out into the bookstore with a muttered goodbye to the man, still rubbing his face in exhaustion.

Phil watches him leave, making a mental note to bring this up at dinner, before his phone buzzes.

He glances down at the contact name and the message, and his mind is instantly cleared of the whole Tommy situation, expression darkening.

*Fuck.*

---

It's getting cold quicker, Tommy notices, stepping on an orange leaf to hear the satisfying *crunch* it makes under his trainers.

(A part of him is glad that Karl had already left before he was able to give his hoodie back — it smelled of the bookstore and freshly baked donuts. It was nice, admittedly, even if it *was* going to be funny trying to give Karl it back on Monday).

Soon, it'll be Halloween, and then fucking *Christmas*. He didn't really mind Halloween, but he despised Christmas. The whole point of the holiday was completely ridiculous to him. Who needed gifts anyways?

(Or maybe he was just bitter about the fact that he hadn't properly celebrated Christmas in years).

Shivering a little, Tommy glances at the time on his phone — he's still got an hour or two until he has to be at Nook's for his second part time shift, and then he has to walk home.

By *himself*. Again.

Digging his nails into his palms, he weighs his options.

Should he risk walking by himself tonight, or risk his already crumbling reputation by contacting someone who could walk him home?

He grimaces at the thought of asking Wilbur or Techno to walk him home again — at this point, it's probably gotten a little too suspicious.

As far as Techno knows, Tommy's gotten jumped once and walked away from it pretty much unscathed; on the other hand, Tommy had told Wilbur he was just afraid of the dark alleyways.

(He really didn't want to go into detail with that overprotective fucker about the whole "getting jumped" scenario, even if it was a lie in the first place).

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he bites his tongue for a moment and then presses his phone to his ear after dialing a number in particular.

He pauses on the sidewalk, waiting impatiently, watching the cars fly past on the road, finger tapping against his thigh until someone picks up.

"Hey, Tubbo..." he begins awkwardly once the person on the other line says hello in exasperation. Tommy rubs the back of his neck nervously, "Uh... I've got a bit of a *favour* to ask of you, king..."

---

"What do you mean, *you think that you hurt him?*" Wilbur seethes, eyes narrowed at Techno, as if ready to slaughter his own twin, who raises his hands in surrender.



All he had done was explain his and Tommy's training lesson the night before - it wasn't as though this was too big of a deal.

He had said that he *thought* he hurt him (no, he *knew* that he hurt Tommy, and the memory made him grimace guiltily), and Wilbur had gotten all defensive immediately.

"He didn't want me to treat him like a beginner, anymore, Wil," Techno responds coolly, inching away from the man, who doesn't seem any less calm from this statement. "Plus, he kept saying how since this was 'our last training session', I should at least go hard on him a little."

"And you *listened* to him?" Wilbur hisses, aghast.

Techno grimaces a bit.

He didn't really know what to say to that one — if he was being honest, he had felt guilty about the whole ordeal since he'd left Tommy in front of his flat, the boy sporting a bloody nose and looking extremely tired, but also as though this wasn't something new.

Rather, Tommy looked... *excited*, almost, to be trained, to be injured (again?).

It didn't help Techno's conscience that *he* had been the one to inflict that on him.

The door opens and shuts to their house and they both lift their head, Phil walking in through the front door and putting his bucket hat on one of the coat hangers, looking especially conflicted about something.

"How was the gremlin today?" Wilbur pipes up, tossing a glare in Techno's direction that says '*If he isn't alright I'll kill you in your sleep*', but Techno's too preoccupied with the strange look on Phil's face to notice.

“Are you alright, Phil?” Techno asks, before adding when Wilbur elbows him indignantly in the ribs, “And, uh... is Tommy alright?”

Phil’s jaw sets a little, and he silently walks over to the two of them.

Wilbur shifts uncomfortably on the sofa at the dark look on his father’s face — he hadn’t seen him look this weirded out in a while and it only served for him to wonder what the fuck had happened.

“Phil—” Techno begins carefully, but Phil raises a hand, and clears his throat.

“We were invited to an *event*,” Phil says calmly, but the last word is particularly venomous, and Wilbur recoils in disgust.

“An event,” Techno repeats, making a face when Phil holds out his phone, allowing Techno to look at the message his father had received earlier.

Wilbur leans close to his brother, glancing over Techno’s shoulder to read as well, and collectively their faces fall, looking up at Phil, the man’s mouth pressed into a tight line.

“Guess we’ll have to pack our bags,” Wilbur says, a bitter edge to his tone, eyes flicking away from the phone darkly.

Techno just huffs. At least he can finally wear that old crimson suit in the back of his closet instead of letting it rot like he had planned.

---

Sam gently places a wet cloth to Tommy’s forehead, eyebrows creasing at the way the boy leans into it, letting out an exhale in relief but still maintaining the tension in his shoulders.

Ranboo, who had apparently come in Tubbo's place to "watch over Tommy" because he had heard he wasn't feeling well, sits beside the boy, fiddling with his own hands and awkwardly casting worried looks in Tommy's general direction.

He had showed up at Nook's only a couple minutes after Tommy and had practically turned the bakery upside down looking for him, only stopping his little freak out when Sam reassured him that Tommy was actually fine.

"Is he sick?" Sam murmurs to Ranboo now, and Tommy grumbles a little under his breath, apparently coming back to reality enough to smack Sam's hand away from him.

He grabs the cloth from Sam and pushes it to his own head aggressively, muttering something about "being able to take care of himself".

"I don't think so," Ranboo responds, heterochromic eyes flicking to his friend who is slouched beside him, "He... he gets like this sometimes, that's all..."

(He doesn't seem too convinced himself, really).

Sam nods though, apparently knowledgeable of this fact, before turning back to Tommy, a hand reaching out to gently rub reassuring circles into Tommy's shoulder. The boy looks up from underneath the rag on his forehead to glare in Sam's general direction (but not going to move out of the way as he'd done before).

Fran, who had been laying on the floor with her head perched on Tommy's shoes, now jumps up onto the bench, laying her head in the boy's lap and making a worried huff, sniffing at Tommy's clothes a little.

"Did you sleep at all, kiddo?" Sam asks worriedly, brushing hair from Tommy's forehead, trying not to feel slightly crestfallen when Tommy smacks his hand away again.

“I slept perfectly well, Sam,” Tommy mutters, gingerly reaching his hand out to stroke Fran’s ears, the dog leaning into the touch, “I’m just a little tired, ‘s normal, man. You’re all so fucking weird with your- your *worried parental auras*. ”

Sam smiles a little, “Our ‘worried parental auras’?”

“Don’t take that the wrong way,” Tommy hisses, narrowing his eyes at the guy, “I’m perfectly content with my *own* parents, you just give off the fucking vibe of a concerned father, or whatever.”

Ranboo looks like he wants to protest here, but Tommy shoots him a piercing glare and the boy keeps his mouth shut, returning to fumbling with his hands and glancing up every now and then at the two.

“I didn’t know you thought of me as your father, Tommy,” Sam teases, and Tommy flushes immediately.

This is the *second* time he’s accidentally implied that Sam was like this to him — fuck’s sake. He’s got to get a fucking grip. Being around those idiots from the bookstore is making him too soft.

It’s only worse when he remembers that he’d fucking anxiously called Tubbo, asking him in embarrassment to please walk him home, and then ended up with *Ranboo* instead. The day can’t get any worse, really.

“I fucking don’t, dickhead,” Tommy seethes, his tone defensive, “I’m just saying that you tend to *act* like one, you asshat. Don’t- don’t go putting words in my mouth, king. That’s just *plagiarism*. ”

“I… did you just say it was called ‘plagiarism?’” Ranboo quotes, looking disgusted at Tommy’s choice of words.

“That’s what I said, innit? Bitch.”

Tommy turns away from his friend, and then grimaces at the stupid smile on Sam’s face. The same patronizing one that's always resting on Phil’s as well, the prick.

“What’re you doing?” Tommy asks.

Sam just continues smiling, raising an eyebrow at Tommy, who begins to bristle.

“Quit- *quit looking at me like that!*”

“Like what, kiddo?”

Tommy narrows his eyes and then stands up abruptly, causing Fran to yelp shortly and jump up with the boy, twisting around his ankles as Tommy walks out of the room, tossing the wet cloth at Ranboo, who flinches away from it.

“I hate you both,” Tommy says over his shoulder, slamming the door shut.

(They both know he doesn’t).

Sam shakes his head fondly, turning now to Ranboo, who looks at the washcloth on the bench as if it had personally offended them.

“Is he like this at home, too?” Sam teases, expecting Ranboo to laugh, but the boy just looks... uncomfortable.

*Really* uncomfortable.

Sam frowns a little.

“You alright, kid? You look a little strange,” Sam begins, slowly getting up from the chair he’d moved in front of the bench, taking Tommy’s wet rag and tossing it in the sink.

When he glances back at Ranboo, the kid really looks strange now, as though he’s hiding something he would rather not be.

Deciding maybe he just shouldn’t push it, Sam turns away, washing his hands in the sink as well, debating if he should force Tommy to take the rest of the night off.

His thoughts are interrupted when Ranboo clears his throat a little, bench creaking when they shift in it.

“Sam,” they begin, voice wavering, and when Sam looks back at him, the kid refuses to look up from the ground. “I, uhm... I have to tell you something.”

---

*Work fucking sucks*, Tommy thinks, dreadfully sweeping the floor in the corner by the front door, wishing that he could just go home and lay down for a second.

He really *can't*, though, because if he wants enough money to even try to pay off his rent this month, he’s got to be in work every chance he gets (and he’d already taken two days off the week before because of fucking *Quackity*).

Tommy sighs, putting his head against the cold, tile wall, letting himself bask in a few moments of silence. He’s lucky to have tonight be one of the ones where there aren’t as many people flooding into the bakery.

“Hey Toms,” Sam calls from across the bakery, and Tommy opens his eyes, looking away from the wall and at the man, who is watching him carefully. (Almost as though looking at him in a new light. Tommy decides not to question it too much). “You wanna go home early? I think it’s another one of those slow nights.”

Tommy just hums, grateful for the opportunity to leave this hellhole, and heads into the back room to put the broom away.

Ranboo stands on the other side of the room, looking extremely out of place with flour staining their arms and an apron wrapped around their waist (Tommy could only assume that’s what he had been doing back there for so long, was learning how to fucking bake).

“Ready to go, Ranboob?” Tommy calls to his friend, stretching his arms out and tilting his neck to the side, trying to get the aching pain out somehow.

“Not my name,” Ranboo says, but there’s a hint of a smile on their face all the same, carefully removing the borrowed apron from around their neck.

---

“Did you have fun learning to cook, big man?” Tommy hums from where he’s saying his final goodbyes to Fran, scratching the puppy behind her ears and glancing at Ranboo, who smiles nervously.

“Sam’s a good teacher,” they respond, rubbing the back of their neck, “I, uh, haven't really got the hang of it yet though, actually...”

Tommy shrugs and stands up straight, Fran licking his hand before he’s fully standing and then rushing into the back room to leave the bakery with Sam, “Eh, you’ll get the hang of it in no time. Sam knows what he’s doing, even if he can be a bitch sometimes.”

Ranboo smiles again and this time it’s more genuine, despite the way it wavers just a tad.

“Thanks, Tommy,” he says quietly, turning so that the two can leave Nook’s.

There’s a stark difference when they walk from inside the bakery to outside of it; with a whoosh of cold air, the homey feeling that Nook’s normally brings is gone, replaced with bitter air and the scent of mildew.

Tommy’s used to it, though. He has been for quite some time; used to the strange feelings Manberg gives him, used to the oxygen supply that all but asphyxiates you.

So why does he feel so weird? As though a sudden chill has rushed down his spine, as though someone’s watching him?

He shoves the feeling away and inches closer to Ranboo on the sidewalk as they walk towards the direction of his apartment complex. He debates about asking to take the Underground (even if it is a little longer, it’s much *safer*), but he decides not to. It could just be out of Ranboo’s way.

They walk in mostly silence, Ranboo hanging his head and dusting the remnants of flour up his arms off, Tommy with his hands shoved in his hoodie pockets and very aware of their current surroundings.

Normally he would do his best to daze off, to think about something random or to wonder about what he could do the next day so he wasn’t so fucking *bored*, but tonight he was... really alert.

Strangely aware, actually, so much so that he could hear the smallest of noises, like the *plinking* of water landing on a garbage bin in the alleyway, or the sound of Ranboo picking at their nails.

There’s also the sound of an engine rumbling, gently, as if parked in place...



“Tommy,” Ranboo says suddenly, and the two stop walking, the guy’s arm held out in front of Tommy, as if he were a mother protecting their child when stopping too quickly at a red light, “Who’s that?”

Tommy blinks, looking out towards his apartment complex. It looks perfectly normal, except for the long black limousine sat right in front, parked in one of the many empty spots. It looks very out of place in contrast to the crumbling building that Tommy calls home.

And he knows *exactly* who that fucking is.

“Just one of my neighbours,” Tommy reassures Ranboo with a shaky smile, patting the man on the arm, who just gives him a frown in return, arm dropping from in front of Tommy. “No need to get all *protective*, Ranboo, you’re just as bad as those other fuckers.”

Ranboo doesn’t look entirely convinced, but he doesn’t press any further, biting the inside of his cheek.

“Can I at least walk you to your apartment so that I feel better?” he asks warily, and Tommy clenches his fist a little by his side and nods. He can only hope that whatever’s waiting for him isn’t standing out front.

Together they walk up the steps of the apartment complex, the anxiety bubbling up in Tommy’s throat with every step they take, and Ranboo sticks very close to him (as if expecting to protect Tommy from something - that’s hilarious, really).

Tommy’s finally able to take a breath when they reach his front door and there’s nothing waiting for them (or him, specifically), and Ranboo puts a hand on his shoulder in reassurance.

“Call me if you need anything, Tommy,” Ranboo says, smiling a little at his friend.

“I don’t ever *need* anything, Ranboo,” Tommy says with an eye roll, even though he feels incredibly... nice that Ranboo cares enough to offer it.

(Not that it will remain that way, of course. He knows that).

“I know, I know, just...” Ranboo takes a step away, holding a hand up to say goodbye, “Don’t be afraid to call, okay?”

“Okay, okay, now *leave*, you fuckin’ sap,” Tommy snorts, turning to his door and putting the key in the lock, waiting until Ranboo’s footsteps to disappear until he actually opens the door.

He walks inside, unsurprised when he sees someone waiting for him in the kitchen, fiddling with the old toaster that Tubbo had given him for a “very late” birthday (or whatever he had called it. It was a pretty ridiculous excuse to just give Tommy something random he couldn’t even use).

(Nothing good ever lasts).

“Hi, Charlie,” Tommy says smoothly, locking the front door behind him and glaring at the slime hybrid that now beams at him from the kitchen.

“Tommy!” the hybrid calls, putting down the toaster and waving at him enthusiastically, “I’ve been waiting for you for hours! Did you know that your toaster doesn’t work?”

“It’s because I don’t use it,” Tommy mutters.

Charlie hums and then his eyes light up and he quickly turns to Oswald’s tank, pointing at the little axolotl that swims around, a large grin on his face.

“Did you know that you have a weird fish thingy in your home, Tommy?” Charlie asks, then glances at Tommy’s hair, “Your hair looks like it’s bleeding!”

“I *live* here. Obviously I know that I have these things,” Tommy sighs, rubbing a hand down his face. He really is too exhausted for this. It’s only his luck to have to deal with fucking Quackity the day after he deals with the Blade. “And it’s just hair dye, Charlie.”

“Ohhh, I wish that *I* had hair that died. You’re so lucky. My hair is always alive... I think. Does hair actually live? Mine’s translucent, so I can’t tell,” Charlie says, tone not once wavering from its cheeriness.

*Fucking hell.*

He’s just gonna decide to gloss right over that.

Tommy pauses, gnawing on the inside of his cheek as he watches Charlie continue to look around his kitchen, even though the guy’s been around the flat plenty of times (hell, he was even there when Tommy first got the place...)

“I’m assuming Quackity’s waiting in the car?” Tommy asks bluntly, getting right to the point and ruffling his curls in exhaustion.

“Nope! He’s waiting at, uh...” Charlie trails off a bit, frowning a little, as if trying to decide if he should reveal that much info or not, before clearly choosing not to when he turns back to Tommy, smiling widely again.

“I’m assuming he’s come to ‘collect’ me, then?” Tommy sighs, tossing his keys onto the counter with a loud *clatter*.

“Yep! You’re very intelligent, Tommy of Manberg,” Charlie says with a sweet grin.

“How many times have I asked you not to call me that?” Tommy grumbles.

“Would you prefer me to go back to one of your old—?”

“No, no, fucking— just call me *Tommy* or something, please.”

“Alright, then, Just Tommy,” Charlie motions towards the door enthusiastically, beaming a little. “Quackity of— *Quackity* is waiting for you!”

Tommy narrows his eyes a little, but relents. There really isn’t anything he can do. If he were to run (which he definitely should have done fucking *months* ago), he would get nowhere. Charlie’s a slime hybrid. They can travel anywhere— it would be a hassle to deal with the mountain of questions Charlie would have if Tommy ran.

(Plus, Tommy didn’t really trust the slime to not go running to Quackity about him running).

“Alright,” Tommy mutters, grabbing his keys off of the counter and putting them in his pocket, pulling his hood up and tucking the tiny braid that Phil had done for him earlier into his hood. “But if there isn’t any Coke in the limo, I’m going to fucking *kill* your boss.”

## Chapter End Notes

tommy: im fine. why does everyone think i’m not fine?

also tommy: \*has a breakdown\*

yes we r gonna gloss over the previous chapter /hj

guys pebble brain. it’s fucking out on youtube. go listen. right now . this is a threat /j /lh  
it’s so good i’m actually . in tears . anyways here’s a link for it :) [pebble brain](#)

also apologies for the slow pacing of this fic aha,, i'm. im rlly rusty when it comes to writing & really am just writing this for laughs so apologies if it isn't always the best or is poorly put together. ty for reading all the same :)

writing next chapter is gonna kick my ass so that might not be out for a bit ): sorry <3

# you're not on ur king shit tonight big q ):

## Chapter Summary

The lights are bright, and then there's someone talking low in his ear, someone dragging him down a pathway, and there's Charlie's giddy voice as always, calling a greeting to—

“Tommy!” Quackity drawls, and suddenly Tommy isn't so tired anymore, head snapping up from the ground (is that— is that a fucking red carpet he's walking on?).

or, tommy arrives in las nevasdas. it's not a fun experience

or or, come get your quackity & tommy duo and leave :)

## Chapter Notes

ahaha uh oh

anyways , the live gig of the pebble brain ep was the best thing ever .

---

**tw** !!!: derealization, nightmare, implied/referenced child abuse, minor talk of blood (lmk if i forgot any, stay safe<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*The wind is so loud.*

*The air is thinning.*

*He feels like he's suffocating, his fingers turning blue.*

...

*Where is he again?*

---

“Tommy... TommyInnit!” a voice whispers, “Wake up, Tommy!”

Tommy opens one eye, frowning at the smiling face of Charlie, who has one hand on his shoulder and is shaking it pretty violently. What the hell?

“Wh... where?” Tommy grumbles, lifting his head up from where it had been squashed against the window of the car (limousine, really) to peek out the tinted windows.

There was a large... building of some sorts in front of them, and the very look of it made Tommy uncomfortable. The lights were too bright, shining through even the fucking *tinted windows* of Quackity's limousine, and the way that Charlie was smiling at him was just as weird as that, really.

He's too tired for this shit.

He probably should've brought home some coffee from work earlier.

“We're here,” Charlie says simply.

Tommy resists the urge to roll his eyes — obviously, they're 'here', but where the hell is *here* supposed to be?

The door to the limousine opens and Charlie bounces out with his normal energy, a hand reaching out to pull Tommy by the arm out of the backseat, making the boy stumble a bit as his feet hit the asphalt. He feels so drowsy, as though someone had injected him with some drugs or something, and his head spins. He really is too fucking tired for this.

The lights are bright, and then there's someone talking low in his ear, someone dragging him down a pathway, and there's Charlie's giddy voice as always, calling a greeting to—

“Tommy!” Quackity drawls, and suddenly Tommy isn't so tired anymore, head snapping up from the ground (is that— is that a fucking *red carpet* that he's walking on?).

Quackity walks down the carpet, arms spread wide, jewelry dangling from his wrists and fastened around his waist, the bright lights glinting off of his waistcoat buttons. He's grinning widely, and there's small plasters decorating a couple places on his face, as though he'd cut himself while shaving accidentally.

“Big Q,” Tommy grits out, clenching his jaw when the man slings a jingling arm around his shoulders, pulling him to his side despite the great difference in height.

“You know, it's so *great* to see you finally here, Tommy,” Quackity admits cheerfully, dragging Tommy along with him as they walk down the red carpet, and Tommy keeps his eyes trained on the floor beneath him, not wanting to succumb to the curiosity prickling at the back of his neck with every light shining down upon them. “I've been wanting to show off this place for *months* now, and who better to show it off to than my little brother?”

“I'm not your fucking *brother*,” Tommy grumbles, glaring at the grin on Quackity's face before his eyes return to the carpet beneath him, counting every step they take, calculating how far away the limousine is from here...

“Not biologically,” Quackity admits with a hum, but he doesn't further dwell on the topic before they've stopped walking, and the man's rather bejeweled hand squeezes Tommy's shoulder enthusiastically, motioning for him to look up.



“Not metaphorically, either, or whatever you mean, dickhead,” Tommy bites out, glaring up at Quackity, refusing to make eye contact, refusing to feel that uneasy sensation at the pit of his stomach that always comes when he looks into the eyes of someone.

(He used to be okay at it).

“That’s no way to treat someone who saved your life,” Quackity teases, squeezing Tommy’s shoulder again, and the boy clenches his jaw, getting ready to quip that *nobody saves him*, but he’s interrupted by a rather irritated voice.

“Hello,” Purpled says, and *now* Tommy’s attention is grabbed, his head swiveling in the direction of the kid, who is standing calmly outside of the large, very bright building, dressed formally with his blonde hair styled, a hat sitting atop of it with a red gem hanging off of the side.

Similar to Quackity, he wears a waistcoat - although his is purple, much akin to his code name rather than red, a stark contrast to how everything else is red - and is wearing suspenders.

He looks hilarious, but this isn’t really the time to make fun of him.

(Besides, Purpled’s in just as shit of a position as Quackity is. Tommy can see it in the bitterness of his eyes).

“Purpled,” Tommy says, voice strained, and the boy gives him a fake smile.

“Great to see you, Tommy.”

“Can’t say the s—” Tommy begins, quickly interrupted by Quackity, who lets out a string of quiet laughter, the kind that makes a chill run up Tommy’s spine because it’s not the same, it’s not like the old Quackity who’s laughter was contagious. It just feels dangerous now, much akin to someone he used to know...

“I brought Tommy over to give him a little showcase of Las Nevadas,” Quackity hums, patting Tommy on the shoulder in a way that makes the boy hiss. “Do you want to join us?”

Purpled narrows his eyes at the two, looking close to dropping the smile on his face, but he maintains it. Tommy has to admit, he’s got skill.

“No, I’m great. I’ve seen my fair share of this nice establishment,” Purpled says sweetly, moving out of the way of the double glass doors so that Tommy and Quackity can go through, his jaw set. “Have fun.”

Quackity nods at him once and then leads Tommy into the building, and immediately the boy’s head snaps up as he hears the sounds of gold jingling and the whirring of machines. *What the hell?*

Tommy... feels like he just walked into a fucking castle.

Above are vaulted ceilings peering down at him, entangled with marble and golden pillars wider than even he is. A chandelier made of gold and red gemstones hangs from the ceiling, the lights made of glittering diamonds and other things.

Lined up against the marble walls decorated in various wires of gold and gemstones are a dozens of games, varying from gambling machines to normal gaming machines, and—

“Is that- did you get a fucking Pac-Man game console?” Tommy chokes out, staring at the video game from the other side of the room.

He recalls a time back in Quackity’s old flat, that smelled of freshly cleaned laundry and warm food (Tommy *liked* his flat, no matter how often the man said he hated it). Quackity had gone on and on about this advertisement he saw online for a £2500 Pac-Man console, saying how he was going to “save up and buy it.”

(They both knew that neither of them combined would ever have the money for such a thing, but at the time it was pretty funny).

“Of all the things, of course *that* grabs your attention,” Quackity jokes, but relents with a minorly kind smile, pulling Tommy over to the game console and letting him fiddle with the buttons on it for a moment. “Do you want to play it?”

“I didn’t bring money with me,” Tommy hums, poking a button, before glaring up at the man, “Didn’t exactly get a fuckin’ notice before you scooped me up, did I? Prick.”

Quackity laughs, “I recall telling you that I was going to pick you up a week later, Tommy.”

“Yeah- well- it’s not Saturday, is it? It’s fucking *Friday*, you were a day early. You coulda warned me ahead of time, big man.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” Quackity holds his hands up with a cool smile, “Look, how about I make up for it?”

Tommy raises an eyebrow at him, watching as Quackity reaches into his waistcoat pocket, pulling out a tiny bag of coins and pulling it open, making a soft jingling noise as he places a few onto the game console in front of Tommy.

“You expect to make up for it by letting me play a game that would typically cost only a *pound*?” Tommy asks indignantly, huffing when Quackity just grins snarkily at him. Fuck the guy and his two-sidedness.

---

Tommy sits uncomfortably in one of the red cushioned chairs that looked just as expensive as the rest of the furniture in this building, fidgeting a little and scratching at the wooden table in front of him.

He doesn't recall Quackity having a fucking *palace* the last time he visited his home — is this even his home, though? The guy had barely said a fucking word about it, mostly just looking all smug at Tommy as the boy wandered around the open and elegantly decorated marble halls of wherever the hell they were.

Quackity had called this place 'Las Nevadas' or something like that. Tommy wishes that he had listened to the man when he offered to give him Spanish lessons months ago so that he could decipher what that meant.

"So," Tommy decides to speak up, eyes flicking across the table, where Quackity is quietly speaking to Purpled, eyes scouring over an iPad (Tommy resists the urge to laugh — Quackity looks awfully like some of the cheesy-fingered kids with their dumb iPads that come into Nook's sometimes. There was a time where he wouldn't be afraid to call this joke out, but now isn't that time).

"Where, uh..." Tommy begins once Quackity has turned his attention back to him, "Where exactly am I?"

"Las Nevadas," Quackity says, as if this were purely obvious. Tommy's eyes narrow when Purpled has to tighten his mouth into a thin line to refrain from smirking.

"Yeah, I *get* that, asshole," Tommy snaps, leaning further into the chair and wrapping his arms around himself, hoping that the hoodie he'd pulled out of his closet can offer some sort of warmth, "But where the fuck *is* Las Nevadas? And *what* is it? You- it's like you've brought me to some rip-off video game centre built into a palace and you're tryna be all subtle about it."

Quackity laughs a little, shaking his head as he does, a bejeweled hand coming to rest on the top of one of the expensive looking chairs, "Is it not obvious, Tommy? This is my place. The place I've been so excited to show you."

Tommy blinks, then his nose shrivels. Maybe he's dreaming again. Maybe he's just back in that limousine, fast asleep on some sugar high dream after chugging a few too many Cokes.

“You’re joking, right?” he asks, even though he knows the answer already.

Quackity liked to pull jokes like these, but something had changed in the past couple of months with him. While he was still the abnormally eccentric person, coming to Tommy’s apartment to make sure he was alright (and drop off the medication, delicately touching the circlet on Tommy’s wrist and furrowing his eyebrows), Quackity seemed a lot more serious as of late.

Tommy wasn’t sure if the change made him uncomfortable or not.

“No, Tommy, I’m not joking, why would I be joking?” Quackity muses, something strange in the way his voice lilts with his tone, like he’s laughing.

“Are you stupid?” Purpled blatantly asks, watching Tommy with something odd and tired resting in his eyes, a flicker of amusement apparent with the twitch of the corner of his mouth.

“No- what the fuck? I’m not fucking stupid,” Tommy seethes angrily, eyes catching the ruby shining in the light from the ceiling on the end of Purpled’s hat, “I’m just *curious*. I haven’t been to Quackity’s flat in- in months and I just didn’t expect...”

Tommy trails off, muttering obscenities under his breath, Purpled turning to Quackity with an eyebrow raised, as if to say, *‘This is the kid you were so excited to bring over?’*

“It’s okay to be confused,” Quackity reassures, and Purpled hums lowly. The man puts his hands together now, jewels glittering from the chandelier, looking particularly dangerous underneath the lighting. So red, as though they’ve been filled with blood... “Just think of it as... a step up in the world for me.”

Tommy really doesn’t like the way Quackity phrased that, but he notices the way the man tightens his jaw a little behind the “reassuring” grin, eyes flicking to the door of the room to signal Purpled to leave.

Shifting uncomfortably again, Tommy rubs the back of his neck, fingers curling in the hair near his collar, watching Purpled's feet as he leaves, the polished steel-tipped shoes shining underneath the lights. The door *clicks* when he goes.

The air grows tight, and Tommy sinks deep into the cushion chair, staring at the curves of gold on the table in front of him, tracing a finger on the velvetine table cover. He doesn't like where this is going — as much as Purpled annoys the shit out of him sometimes, the guy's a good buffer when it comes to Quackity.

*Kind of like a younger brother*, something rang in Tommy's head, making him dig his nails into the strangely soft chair cushion beneath him. Out of irritation, he wasn't sure.

"So, Toms," Quackity says, and Tommy can hear the scratching of wood against the floor as the man takes a seat across from him, but he keeps his eyes off of the man. He has a feeling he knows exactly what direction this is going in, and he wishes he didn't. "How are you liking Las Nevadas?"

"Is that *really* the question you're asking me?" Tommy hisses, grimacing a tad.

"You know me too well," Quackity exhales, and there's a thump and a squeaking sound as the man shifts in the chair, putting his feet up on the table. "I just wanted to break the ice a bit, kid. Plus, I really *do* want to know what you think of Las Nevadas. I thrive on reviews."

Tommy resists the urge to roll his eyes. He should've known that Quackity would end up just like the fucking rest of them — pretentious.

(He misses the days where the man was more *real*, nice kind hugs and a truthfulness to his tone, no serious facial expressions. Just laughter. Tommy needed the humour, really).

"What do you *really* want to talk about, then?" he hisses through his teeth.

Quackity hums, clearly disappointed at not receiving a review from Tommy (what the fuck was he supposed to say? He isn't Yelp).

“Do you remember Bad?”

Tommy shudders at the name, goosebumps taking over his arms and he bites his tongue so as to not say anything too harsh about the demon hybrid. The guy was alright, but he was pretty damn annoying with his thing against cursing. He did make killer muffins, though.

“Kind of,” Tommy admits, poking one of the strange golden tassels hanging off of the tablecloth to try and keep himself grounded. If only he had the mind to bring his pocket knife...

“Well, he's hosting this banquet in a couple weeks...” Quackity trails off and Tommy's eyes shoot up, finally meeting the man's, which sparkles with something strange. Something familiar.

“What kind of banquet?” Tommy hisses out, sitting up straight in his chair and leaning forwards against the table.

Quackity grins sharply, mimicking Tommy as he leans against the table, pressing his hands together. This is the first time that Tommy notices one of his hands has been covered with a white glove, but only half of it, from his knuckles to the tips of his fingers.

“Tommy, what do you know of the Syndicate?”

## Chapter End Notes

dsmp!tommy: holy shit quackity las nevasdas is so cool oh my god this is amazing omg

butterflies!tommy: what the fuck is this king

oh my god ????? 3k kudos??? that's the most i've ever gotten holy shit thank u guys so much. ily /p <3

**author drabble (feel free to skip<3)**

im rlly sorry for a bit of a short update , i am not feeling well ): i'm really ill so apologies in general if the next update isn't out for a hot second. idk why this chapter was so hard to write lmao

hope u guys r well :)

(i think i found out how to put my fics into an anonymous series,,, should i do that ?)



## ha, u read music scores? based!!

### Chapter Summary

“What? Why? Haven’t I invaded your house too much in the past week?” Tommy jokes.

“You’ve only come over once, Toms,” Wilbur responds smoothly, even though it’s technically a lie. The boy still had no recollection of being sick at his house somehow.

“Yeah, well—”

“You’re overthinking,” Wilbur points out, wrapping an arm around Tommy’s shoulder kindly and pulling him to his side with a grin, “Phil doesn’t mind, and you know Techno enjoys you just as much as you enjoy him. He’ll like having someone around who adores Greek mythology just as much as he does.”

“Not a Greek mythology fan, huh?” Tommy mumbles, shoving against Wilbur’s side to try and escape the arm looped around his shoulders, “Kinda- kinda stupid of you.”

or, crimeboys content, gigglechamp duo my beloved, & awesamdad has a bit of a breakthrough. uh oh? plot? in this household?

### Chapter Notes

if crimeboys make an arg i’ll make a ~10k+ crimeboys-centric fic /srs

---

**tw:** talk of bruising, scars, & blood, mentions of/implied character death & child abuse, PLATONIC possessive behaviour, self-deprecating thoughts, talks of kidnapping (lmk if i forgot any, ty<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy blinks, slowly, like he's coming out of a dream, and the walls waiver and float out of view. He feels like he's been *drugged*, like his mind's on another planet, but he knows that he isn't.

(Quackity was many things, but intentionally giving Tommy faulty medication was not one of those traits).

At least the back pain's dissipated a little, the way it always did with the special medication that Quackity gave him with a pity smile and a hand clasped over his bracelet, a promise, a secret shared between two.

(Tommy wondered just how long that promise would remain unbroken).

There's a buzz to his phone then, and he glances down for a moment. He's got a lot of missed calls and texts from both Ranboo and Tubbo alike, wondering if he was safe.

Ranboo had obviously told Tubbo about the suspicious car in the front lot of his apartment, that snitch.

It was alright, though; Tommy typed a quick reassuring reply that he'd just fallen asleep without checking his phone and then tossed the device across the floor, watching it land in a soft pile of crumpled up clothes.

Tommy lowers his gaze to his arm, looking over the fresh and not scars that graze them, bruises and plasters echoing across every part like a strange abstract painting.

He raises his arm, examining his fingers under the very low light coming in from the edge of the window (that was now fixed, he realized with a strange lurch of his stomach), taking in the uneven mess that was his nails, trying not to lose himself to a different world.

He had to go to the Banquet; as much as he didn't want to, as much as he knew he would drag his fucking feet the entire way and hide in the corner of the crowd, unseeing, he *had* to fucking go.

Quackity needed him to, apparently — more particularly, he needed the “insights” that Tommy had on the Syndicate (the idea of giving away the very few things he knew about the fucking villain organization made his toes curl).

Tommy had declined, at first, with arms straightened at their sides, glaring at the man, who just grinned widely in return.

*“Who is going to stop them, then?”* Quackity had mused, bejeweled finger touching his temple as he watched Tommy over, a glint of something in his eyes, *“You do still want to be a hero, don't you?”*

*No*, Tommy wanted to scream right there. He wanted nothing more than to clamor to his feet and slam his hands on the table, to grab the pocket knife he had forgotten at home, hopefully able to scare Quackity into the possibilities of reading his mind, *No, I stopped wanting to be a fucking hero the day that they made me stop being one. The day I should have died.*

*“They're nothing but egotistical assholes,”* he had once told the Blade, and he had meant it.

But, Quackity had somehow gotten to him — the man had looked right through him, reached into his soul the way he knew how to do and pulled something out with him that made his golden tooth glint.

*“You could get back at them, you know,”* the man had begun serenely, leaning back in his chair with a terrible squeak, feigning innocence as he didn't look at Tommy again, *“Show them that they're nothing compared to you. That just a simple... vigilante as yourself could do so much more than them.”*

*“Theseus is dead,”* Tommy had all but snarled, hands clutching the armrests of the elegant chair in order to hold himself back from lunging across the table.

Vigilante or hero, his days of imbedding himself into that kind of business were over (no matter how much it stopped the tremble to his hands, the anxiety pilling in his throat, begging him to do *something*. He had succumbed for a while, but it was over now).

*“He may be dead,”* Quackity had then mused, looking at Tommy much akin to a curious cat, putting his fingers together, *“But you’re aware of the old motto we once had, right? ‘What’s already dead may never die again’?”*

So with that, Tommy had ended up back in that dumb, cigarette scented limousine with a freshly pressed crimson and white suit spread across one of the empty white leather seats on his way home. He had wished Charlie could’ve come with him and offered some sort of “lightening the mood”, but it was impossible. The slime hybrid was left to stay in Las Nevadas, his “home” if you asked Quackity, his “temporary residence”, if you asked him.

(Tommy had searched up the meaning of ‘Las Nevadas’ on his phone during the car ride home, unable to fall asleep, nearly dropping the device into the floorboard at what the translation of it had said. He decided it was an accident, just a coincidence. A pretty name with no underlying meanings).

Tommy grimaces now, back in his home, nowhere else but on his sofa, watching the way his hand shakes under the early morning light, eyes grazing over horrible scars that decorate his skin.

A suit sits, pressed and untouched, on the kitchen counter, right beside Oswald’s tank.

And Tommy wonders distantly (for what must be the millionth time) what would’ve happened if he had just died that day like he should have.

---

“Where’s Tommy?” Wilbur asks Phil indignantly the second he pries open the man’s door to his office, poking his head in with a glare at his father, who was busying himself with

paperwork.

“Is he not behind the counter?” Phil frowns, leaning to the right so he can peek around Wilbur’s tall figure, squinting across the room in search of the familiar blonde and red hair sitting ruefully at the front counter.

Tommy definitely wasn’t behind there, but he *had* clocked in earlier that morning.

Hadn’t he?

“Have you checked upstairs?” Phil wonders, leaning back in his chair with a pen tapping his chin, recalling a time a couple of months ago when Karl had told him that Tommy had fallen asleep upstairs accidentally in his “Tommy Corner”.

(What a “Tommy Corner” was, he didn’t want to know).

“... I haven’t,” Wilbur responds, and then he’s out of Phil’s office in an instant, hair coiling as he swiftly shuts the heavy wooden door, leaving the man inside exhaling and rubbing his temples.

These kids were giving him gray fucking hairs, really. Maybe he would have to go into a home early.

---

Wilbur walks swiftly up the iron steps that wind like a funnel tube, his hand clutching the shaky railing (he makes a mental note to yell at Phil later about how shaky it was: seriously, if he finds out Tommy falls and gets hurt because of it, he just may have to change his last name from Craft).

When Wilbur reaches the very top landing, he finds Karl of all people, sitting cross-legged on the floor in a section labeled “*Alternate Realities & More*”.

He didn’t know Karl much; what he did know just from one glance was that the guy was an eccentric person. He constantly had his head buried in books that Wilbur couldn’t fathom even the mere title of, wearing pastel coloured clothing with tips of hair painted in greens and purples and pinks or sometimes even blondes. With every step, Karl’s jewellery made tiny jingling noises, no different than Technoblade’s did when he was all decked out in gold.

Wilbur also knew that Karl was just as protective of Tommy as Wilbur knew he himself was — although Karl didn’t show it in the “possessive behaviour” that Wilbur does (he had spoken to his therapist too many times to know that he showed it in this way). Karl’s behaviour was more on the calm spectrum, from the way he’d throw his hoodies around Tommy’s shoulders when he was tired or reassure that Tommy wasn’t bothering anyone when he’d go on tangents about cool things (earning a soft, appreciative smile in return). It was the little things with Karl, really.

As Wilbur pauses by the little walkway between bookshelves, watching Karl curiously as the guy trifles through the pages of the book (he had only just noticed the variety of rings on the man’s left hand), sharp blue eyes meet his and Wilbur holds back a flinch.

They stare at one another for just a second, and then Karl relents with a tip of his head towards the bookshelf, lifting a finger to point in the same direction. It’s not much, but it’s something, and Wilbur feels strangely as though he was just given permission to find Tommy or something like that. Weird.

He holds his hand up to Karl in thanks, giving the guy a bit of a watery smile, which is returned tenfold with one of the guy’s dopey, half-grins that he usually tosses at Tommy.

Wilbur continues down the corridor, anxiously stuffing his hands into his trenchcoat (it’s strange, the tumbling nervous feeling twirling at the bottom of his gut. He’s grown used to it, but it still doesn’t change how unnerving it is, how randomly it appears, making him feel like something’s gnawing away at his stomach).

He turns the corner and — *oh*.

Well, he's definitely found Tommy, he thinks with a soft, fond smile crawling onto his face, the anxiety melting away as he leans against one of the bookshelves, ankles crossing.

In front of him is a small clearing in the bookstore, a wooden table shoved against a big bay window that looks over all of Manberg. (Wilbur can even see the Schlatt Tower in the car background, and it makes his fingernails dig into the fabric of his coat for just a moment).

The boy sitting in a chair as close to the window as possible has his face stuffed into his arms, blonde hair in poofs of red and gold covering his face, the sun rising over the horizon decorating each strand in something that glints like real, true golden jewellery.

(He smirks at the idea of Technoblade seeing this without his suppressor on and how *horrid* his Piglin instincts would be. The thought is truly laughable, but it makes something even more fond grow at the base of his stomach).

He isn't sure how long he's stood there, just watching his little brother's back rise and fall, until the boy shifts to consciousness, raising his head with curls tumbling into his eyes, blinking at Wilbur in confusion. The sight brings on a wave of *deja vu* to the time that Tommy had grown sick, looking exactly like this with droopy eyes and furrowed eyebrows.

"Wil?" Tommy grumbles, sounding mildly irritated, pawing at his eyes tiredly. "What're you doin'?"

"Coming to see you, obviously," Wilbur responds warmly, striding over to him in two footsteps, pulling a chair out so that he can sit beside Tommy, who glares sleepily at him. "Didn't rest again or something?"

Tommy just shrugs, "Sleep is for losers. Haven't I told you that before?"

Wilbur rolls his eyes and pushes his shoulder against Tommy's, jostling him jokingly.

“Yeah, well, you need your rest, haven’t I told *you* that before?”

“Too many times,” Tommy sighs, dragging a hand down his face, “You’re a broken record at this point, Wil. Get well soon.”

“Prick.”

“Bitch.”

“I’m starting to believe Techno’s the favourite, you never bully him,” Wilbur complains, making a sad face at Tommy’s sudden smug expression.

“He *is* the favourite,” Tommy responds with a lilt to his tone.

Wilbur gasps, offended, “I’ll kill him.”

“What the fuck? What’s wrong with you?”

“That way *I’m* the favourite, obviously,” Wilbur grins, ruffling Tommy’s hair, voice taking on a teasing tone. Tommy rolls his eyes, glowering at the man and swatting his hands away.

“You- you’ve got serious issues,” Tommy responds, leaning back against the window glass with a huff, “Get therapy or something, big man.”

Wilbur just hums, smiling warmly at the boy.

“Did you want something?” Tommy hisses, eyeing Wilbur in his peripheral.



“What? Can’t I just hang out with my little brother?” Wilbur teases, and Tommy’s eyebrows furrow, making the man sigh in slight defeat. “Well, uh, actually, I was gonna ask if you wanted to come over again tonight.”

“What? Why? Haven’t I invaded your house too much in the past week?” Tommy jokes.

“You’ve only come over *once*, Toms,” Wilbur responds smoothly, even though it’s technically a lie. The boy still had no recollection of being sick at his house somehow.

“Yeah, well—”

“You’re overthinking,” Wilbur points out, wrapping an arm around Tommy’s shoulder kindly and pulling him to his side with a grin, “Phil doesn’t mind, and you know Techno enjoys you just as much as you enjoy him. He’ll like having someone around who adores Greek mythology just as much as he does.”

“Not a Greek mythology fan, huh?” Tommy mumbles, shoving against Wilbur’s side to try and escape the arm looped around his shoulders, “Don’t like the myth of Hercules, huh? Kinda- kinda *stupid* of you.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, “It’s hard to stay a fan of something when your brother rants and raves about it constantly. He rarely shut up about it for *years*, Tommy, it was horrible.”

“You just have poor taste,” Tommy decides with a smug expression, which quickly falls when Wilbur flicks him on the forehead. “Who only reads fuckin’ music scores? I checked those out and *Primes*, they’re so *boring*. I should’ve guessed you’d like something like that, you prick.”

“You checked out music scores?” Wilbur’s grin only widens, eyes crinkling at the corners behind his wire-framed glasses. “Because you knew that I liked them?”

“No, no, no, wait—” Tommy begins, laughing nervously, “Don't get the wrong idea. I was just curious, asshole.”

“Oh, I'm *sure*. You were just curious, had nothing to do with wanting to be like big brother Wilbur, of course,” the man beams, and Tommy's eyes narrow, shifting so he's out of the chair and rubbing at his eyes again.

“Fuck you, I'm gonna get back to work before Phil fires me,” he mumbles, flicking the back of Wilbur's head as he walks past.

(They both know Phil would never).

“You didn't even answer me, though!” Wilbur whines as he watches Tommy walk off.

“I'm only coming over if you make me crepes again!” Tommy calls in response, clamoring down the iron stairs, leaving Wilbur only slightly crestfallen.

---

Sam lifts Fran from off the ground, the dog yipping excitedly in his arms and trying to lick his chin as the man laughs lightly, shifting so that the fluffy white dog is in Tommy's arms instead.

“You've burdened me, Sam,” the boy whines despite the way he grins and giggles when the dog licks his face uncontrollably, tail wagging. “Fran, what the hell, *quit* that!”

“She missed you,” Sam responds with a soft smile.

“Yeah, well, who wouldn't miss me?” Tommy responds, snickering when Fran licks his cheek again, accidentally making the hair tucked behind his ears wet with saliva. “Ew, Fran, you got my hair wet!”

Sam watches the scene with a gentle smile, rustling his sleeves above his elbow again; his forearms are dusted in flour (and now white dog hair) from where he'd been making a fresh batch of bread.

His heart clenches when the bell in the front room rings, making Tommy's smile quirk down just a tad as he is forced to place Fran back gently to the ground, hurrying with a hand coursing through his hair to tame it towards the front to take the customer's order.

Sometimes Sam wonders if he should lessen Tommy's hours; give him most of the night off, starting at eleven pm, so that the kid doesn't go home so *late*... unfortunately, though, the last time he'd tried to lessen his hours, Tommy had thrown a fit.

He'd gone all quiet, which in itself was worrying, dipping his head the way he does when he doesn't want to meet someone's eyes, going on a tangent about how he really needed the extra money and stuff that...

That a teenager shouldn't have to go through (Sam knew he was young, but how young, he wasn't quite sure. A part of him didn't want to know, but another part of him, one that longed to just hug Tommy close and take him home so that he wouldn't get hurt anymore, wanted differently).

Sam allowed him to continue his current work ethic, guilt clawing him from the inside out as he tried to convince himself things would be alright, that Tommy would get home alright that night, despite the lingering voice that told him to offer the kid a ride home.

Things had started to look up when he'd noticed that some of Tommy's friends started walking him home (regulars at the bookstore, Tommy had explained, and even regulars at the café as well, Sam would notice. He was pretty good with faces).

It wasn't much, but it was enough to quell the strenuous fear Sam had everytime he watched Tommy lock the shop up, sending him a small smile and a wave as he said goodbye, telling him each time that he'd "see him around". It was like the boy's calling card, really.

For a short time period, that's what Sam had; the comforting knowledge that Tommy would have someone to take him home, someone that definitely seemed like they cared (despite the strange thing telling him that he really should look into the people more, Sam had a feeling that they were trustworthy. Moreso, that they wouldn't hurt a hair on *Tommy's* head).

Until Ranboo visited, and things started to spiral out of control.

Sam didn't mind the kid — in fact, he was actually quite glad that Tommy had friends that seemed to be more his age.

Proud of him, even, ~~much like a father would be.~~

Plus, Ranboo was sweet; he liked baking, that much was apparent, and they were also very nice, to both Sam and Tommy. They reminded Sam of himself, really, with the way his hands fidgeted when dumping the flour into a bowl, the way their eyes would anxiously run over Tommy's face like the kid was a piece of glass ready to shatter.

But there was something off about him, in almost a familiar way. He couldn't quite place it until Tommy had left and Ranboo leaned down, anxiously whispering into his ear that he *knew*.

That he knew Sam's secret, the very thing he had sworn to take to his fucking grave, the one that he never wanted to think about ever again (even though the trunk stuffed precariously underneath his bed, locked with a deadbolt and sunken in from the times Sam had slammed it to a wall provided some unwanted nostalgia).

At first, Sam's reaction was to run.

He didn't want to hurt a kid, but if Ranboo knew, he wouldn't have a choice, and he'd rather just flee instead of being forced into a fight that he knew he wouldn't be able to win (hurting children had been one of the very reasons he'd left his previous 'occupation' in the first place).

Until Ranboo lifted his hands, awkwardly stepping away with eyes wide, anxiously saying that he was “one of them, too”, but not the way Sam thought — he was a vigilante, rather, and although it did release some tension in the man’s shoulders, he was still uncomfortable.

(At least it explained the familiarity of him, and he put two and two together with the vigilante Particle that he’d see usually in cahoots with Bumble on television).

Then Sam had asked if Tommy was one, too, and Ranboo shook his head vigorously, words tumbling out over themselves as he claimed that ‘it didn’t matter’ and that ‘there were more important things to think about, anyways.’

Sam snorted at that, but relented; he doubted Tommy was any sort of vigilante, honestly. It wasn’t difficult to see how the boy would snarl at the news if there were any showings of heroes or villains alike in action.

(He wondered what had happened but kept his nose out of it).

“What’s so important that you decided to tell me this?” Sam had asked, anxiously running a hand down his face, mind swirling with multiple things at once.

Ranboo twisted a golden ring decorating his right ring finger nervously, it making a soft clinking whenever they tapped a fingernail against it.

“When, uhm... when you were a Hero, did you know about a demon hybrid named Bad?” he whispered, refusing to meet Sam’s gaze.

“Yeah, I used to visit his shop,” Sam had responded, blinking a tad at the memory. Him and Bad had been pretty good friends — he had given Sam free muffins sometimes for “making the world a better place” (even though Sam’s hope in that phrase grew less and less over the years).

It was one of his inspirations to take up baking when he'd left his spot as a hero, actually. Bad was a pretty inspiring person in Manberg, so it was pretty strange that Sam hadn't seen him in so long (hiding from the main plaza of Manberg was something he prided himself in, but unfortunately it happened to be the very place that Bad's shop was located).

"Well, uhm..." Ranboo bites the inside of his cheek, looking particularly anxious about finishing his sentence, "He's hosting a little get together, apparently, for Heroes and Villains alike. Sort of like... a peace party, I think...? He- he had called it a Banquet when he told me to send message to you that uhm... that you were invited..."

Sam makes a face at that, deciding not to dwell too much into the fact that Bad hadn't asked him himself about attending the party, instead sending a kid in his place, "Bad is hosting a *peace banquet*?"

Honestly, it sounded exactly like something the demon hybrid would do — creating "world peace" was a big thing that Bad advocated for, especially when it came between the Heroes and Villains of Manberg. He hated seeing everyone in a scuffle, especially when he had friends on "both sides" apparently.

(Sam never pressed, though — as far as he could gather from gossiping fellow heroes, Bad's closest friend was a villain).

"Sounds like it'll end in a massacre," Sam said eventually with a click of his tongue, fidgeting with a wooden spoon laid out on the baking table, anything to distract himself from the inevitable.

"I know," Ranboo had responded in a whisper, eyes averted, "But I think it may be good, really. From uhm, from what I've heard, Bad's a pretty strong hybrid. He knows what he's doing, if anything were to break out between the two groups."

"It's a shock he invited you," Sam comments, quickly backpedaling when he sees the droop to the corner of Ranboo's mouth, "No, no, I didn't mean like that, kid, I just meant that it's a bit of a shock that he invited vigilantes, too."

Ranboo perked up a tad, back straightening, “Yeah, it’s a good thing, I think. I’m kinda excited about it. I finally get to wear a suit to something that actually requires it.”

Sam hummed, giving the kid a reassuring smile, before frowning once more.

“I still don’t quite get why both of you invited *me*, though,” he admitted a bit sheepishly, “I know I used to be a hero, but that isn’t me anymore. I quit months ago, surely Bad would know that, right?”

“Yeah, well,” Ranboo scratched the back of his neck, laughing a little, “He did invite you, so... just think about it, maybe? It could be good for you... if you have friends still in the field or anything.”

(It was more like a question than it was a statement).

Sam made a face, “I don’t really know if I would like to see my old ‘hero pals’ again, if that’s what Bad’s trying to start up here.”

“Why not? Didn’t you leave just because you wanted to retire?” Ranboo asked, looking genuinely confused, and Sam sighed. It was the classic story that the news had twisted in favour of the heroes once again — that the great Warden had simply retired from his duties out of “stress on the field”.

“They say that,” he had responded darkly, “But I really quit because of what happened to Theseus.”

“Dream’s old sidekick?” Ranboo murmured, sounding a little strange as he reminisced.

“Protégé, actually. It wasn’t just his death, though, that made me leave, but also plenty of other kids’,” Sam responded, voice tired, as though carrying guilt with every word spoken, “As much as the news likes to make them out to be, heroes aren’t... that great of people.”

“I know,” Ranboo murmured, and there was a hand patting Sam’s shoulder, nervous but reassuring, “But, uhm, if it makes you feel any better, I think that you are.”

Sam smiled weakly, “Thanks, kid.”

---

“This is a kidnapping,” Tommy announces, staring at Wilbur’s grinning face as the man leaned against the store window, arms crossed in waiting. “Sam, Sam, I’m getting *kidnapped*.”

The baker, who had been sweeping the floor behind the register, gave Tommy an amused smile, “I don’t think that Wilbur’s trying to kidnap you, kiddo.”

“No, no, he *is*, he said it himself!” Tommy continues to whine, putting his head on Sam’s shoulder in defeat (missing the way the man grins widely and pats his back sympathetically).

“It’s okay, Tommy,” Sam says in a gentle tone, “If he really is a kidnapper, I’ll just ban him and his whole family from the café.”

“What the hell, Sam?” Wilbur says from across the bakery sadly.

“Thanks, Sam, you are truly the biggest man,” Tommy comments genuinely, his emotions pulling another 180 as he grins at the man.

“Thank you, Tommy,” Sam returns the grin, but it’s much more soft than the boy’s.

Tommy pats his shoulder enthusiastically, peeling his apron off before turning on his heel to retake his spot beside Wilbur on the other side of the café, “Bye bye, Sam boy, time to get



kidnapped.”

Fran scuttles over from out the back room, jumping into Tommy’s lap as the boy goes to leave, making Tommy giggle enthusiastically and lean down so that the little dog can lick his face again.

“I *already* said bye to you, Fran,” Tommy complains, not sounding particularly upset about this ‘dilemma’.

“Seems like you have a new best friend, Tommy,” Wilbur says as he squats down beside Tommy and the dog, a warm smile on his face as he reaches out and pets Fran, who licks his hand enthusiastically. “Eww, dog slobber!”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Tommy says, sticking his tongue out at Wilbur, who frowns at him before wiping his slobbery hand on Tommy’s jumper.

“What the fuck?!”

“*Don’t be such a baby,*” Wilbur mocks, and Tommy glares daggers at him.

“I’m going to clart you,” Tommy decides abruptly, making both Sam and Wilbur snicker at his choice of words.

“If you two fight, take it outside, please,” Sam announces from behind the counter, watching the whole scene with a wide smile on his face, and Tommy groans, rolling his eyes and setting Fran back down in favour of getting to his feet.

“Sorry, Sam,” he grumbles. “We will leave you alone now, you got your *big man* shit to do and whatever.”

“Bye, kiddo,” Sam responds, waving as Wilbur slings an arm around Tommy’s shoulders and leads him from the café. He can hear them bickering half of the way out, but he smiles a little to himself when he hears Tommy’s distant “see you around!” called out before the glass door swings shut.

## Chapter End Notes

hi hi hello! hope u guys r doing well!

butterflies!tommy back on his dumb shit lets go !! mans really said “a party? that the guy who is currently on a murderous rampage hunting me will be at? lmao okay”.

as always, only sam seems to have a braincell! pogchamp

((i made a series for all my fics finally, check it out if u want to see all my fics compiled together :) /nf))

(chap title is /j)

**author drabble below! feel free to skip if you’d like :)**

tubbo won mcc and i’m so very proud of him !! also we got crimeboys content today, even if it was just crumbs, so obviously i had to speedrun a chapter. oh and we got gigglechamp duo crumbs during minecraft live so. poggers fr

still not feeling great, so apologies if that possibly makes my updates not so frequent, beloveds.

also, genuine question time: do you guys want more fluff or angst for the next chapter?  
lmk<3 /nf

see you around<3

# a shame you seemed an honest man

## Chapter Summary

(chapter title from the song ‘duvet’ by bôa)

“Get behind me,” Wilbur whispers to him suddenly, breaking him out of his thoughts with how stressed he sounds.

Tommy frowns up at him, unable to decline when the man throws out an arm in front of him, eyes trained on the alleyway, looking prepared to fight.

(The sight would be laughable literally any other time; Wilbur, taking on The Bard. Tommy could only imagine how entertaining that fight would be).

“Wil, I’m sure it’s nothing,” Tommy whispers in response, despite the way his voice wavers a little bit. “Maybe it’s just a raccoon or something...”

or, crimeboys out on a walk! what will they do? anyways look at the word count

## Chapter Notes

i sneezed so many times writing this

---

**tw**s derealization, fidgeting/vague sh(? digging nails into palms), anxiety

It's a cold night out, much more than usual, and Tommy puts his hands in his jumper pockets in an attempt to ward off the icy air sinking into his fingers. He curls them into the fabric inside of his pockets, wishing he had some sort of gloves...

His eyes flick to the left, where Wilbur walks next to him, rambling about something, one hand pulled from his trench coat pockets to straighten the wire-framed glasses sat on his nose and occasionally ruffle his wind-ridden curls. He looks relaxed, shoulders without tension, head cocked to the side, a smile on his face that shows off one of his dimples.

It's nice walking home with Wilbur, just listening to him talk about anything and everything. Tommy doesn't frequently just listen to him; usually he interrupts or adds his own input to Wilbur's rambling, earning a fond smile from the man, who just nods and lets him continue, not once interrupting him.

But, sometimes it's nice to just stay quiet, to let someone fill your mind with their own thoughts that strive to disrupt your own.

Tommy hums a little under his breath, tilting his head so that he can hear Wilbur's rambling a bit better (he's ranting about something to do with the sea, and Tommy can't quite grasp what he's talking about; something along the lines of "the feeling of accidentally swallowing salty water", etc.)

Maybe in another life, the man could have a podcast where he just spoke about stuff (and Tommy would listen to it *constantly*, no matter what he was doing).

He glances up at the sky every so often, eyes skimming the different constellations he can't name (no matter how many times he tried to pay attention to each name of a constellation in one of the old books Karl had been reading, he never could figure it out).

They both pass underneath a streetlight, Tommy now looking at Wilbur again who has begun to explain his theory about one of the Manberg bridges, when there's an inconspicuous clang from the alleyway.

Tommy flinches, more than he had expected to, and he's turning his head in an instant, eyes wide open as he stares down the alleyway, the feeling of bile crawling up into his throat.

The uneasy feeling of the possibilities of what could've made that noise scratch at his back and he can't help but shudder, fingers clenching and nails digging into the palms of his hands.

The Bard was still looking for him — that much was obvious. If there was something Tommy knew from his years as a fucking hero, the Syndicate members never gave up on people who had witnessed their crimes. Never.

Anxiety increases to a tenfold, and Tommy has to bite back a bit of a low fearful noise, when he knows he probably shouldn't be scared. Not for himself, anyways; in any other case, he would take off running and not look back, just like he had done all those weeks ago.

The difference this time was that *Wilbur* was here. He couldn't just take off running for no reason, and he certainly couldn't fucking tell him that he had literally witnessed a crime by one of the *Syndicate* members of all people.

(The very thought of the look of fear and disgust that would cross Wilbur's face at the secret made him feel physically sick).

"Get behind me," Wilbur whispers to him suddenly, breaking him out of his thoughts with how stressed he sounds.

Tommy frowns up at him, unable to decline when the man throws out an arm in front of him, eyes trained on the alleyway, looking prepared to fight.

(The sight would be laughable literally any other time; Wilbur, taking on *The Bard*. Tommy could only imagine how entertaining that fight would be).

"Wil, I'm sure it's nothing," Tommy whispers in response, despite the way his voice wavers a little bit. "Maybe it's just a raccoon or something..."

Wilbur doesn't respond, and Tommy can see him gnawing on his lower lip anxiously, fingers twitching midair from where he's got his arm held out in front of the boy still.

"Wilbur," Tommy tries again, and he reaches out to grip the man's trench coat sleeve, pulling on it lightly. He can feel his heart racing now, feeling almost like it's going to burst out of his chest, and it's too much, too overwhelming, and his ability to breathe feels like it's dissipating. "Wil, please, can we just go?"

Wilbur makes a dismissive noise in his throat but relents, wrapping an arm around Tommy's shoulders and pulling him to his side, twisting so that they're quickly walking down the pavement, Wilbur constantly glancing behind them just in case.

Tommy shifts uncomfortably beside the man, jostling his hands in his pockets and facing the ground, breathing in and out, leaning into Wilbur's warmth.

They pass underneath another streetlight and he exhales and—

He stops walking.

"Tommy?" Wilbur stops walking as well, arm still wrapped tightly around the boy's shoulders, tilting his head down to frown in concern at Tommy, who was just staring at the pavement now. "Is everything okay?"

Tommy doesn't respond.

"Tommy — hey, hey, are you alright?" Wilbur asks again, his tone edging on desperation now, turning quickly to the boy and bending down, arm removing itself from around Tommy's shoulders so he can raise his hands and place them onto his shoulder blades instead. "Talk to me, buddy. What's going on in that head of yours?"

The blonde looks up at him and blinks a little, “Oh, hey. Sorry, Wil, I just...”

He blinks some more, and then shakes his head, hair ruffling.

“Is everything okay...?” Wilbur asks again, scanning Tommy’s face carefully, hands heavy on the boy’s shoulders. “Did that scare you too bad, Toms? I can go check it out to make sure it was nothing if you want, Tommy.”

(The last thing that Tommy would want is for Wilbur to get involved in the potentiality of the two of them running into the fucking Bard).

“No, no, no— Wil, I’m fine, really, I just...” Tommy exhales, his breath coming out as gusts of fog into the air, floating up into the streetlight before dissipating.

His eyes follow it all the way up, before they land on Wilbur again, “I didn’t know it had gotten that cold yet.”

Wilbur relaxes again, shoulders unraveling, and he laughs in relief, shaking his head, “Really, Toms?”

“Don’t make fun of me, you prick!”

“Did you think it was summer or something?” Wilbur asks, and he’s still smiling, his face relaxing with each passing second that Tommy’s okay (even as his eyes flick up to the alleyway dangerously, preparing if anything were to occur).

“Well, yeah, it was just summer a couple months ago, Wilbur,” Tommy snaps, shrugging before hiking his hands up his arms to try and warm himself up when he shudders, exhaling a shaky breath again. The fog reappears, and Tommy makes a bit of a face at it.

Wilbur snorts, letting go of Tommy's shoulders, not quite noticing the look of apathy on his friend's face. He wraps an arm around the boy again, though, not quite letting Tommy leave by his side.

"Are you cold, kiddo?" he asks after they start walking again, tone bordering on something sweet, and Tommy takes the opportunity to change the subject by glaring at him. He blatantly ignores the fact that Wilbur is the third person to call him *kiddo*.

"Don't you patronize me, of *course* I'm fucking cold, dickhead," Tommy hisses, jamming his elbow into Wilbur's side, causing the man to cough. "It's nearly winter, innit? And I've only got so many fuckin' jumpers in my closet."

"Call up your mum and have her buy you more," Wilbur teases, rubbing his ribs with his free hand where he'd been spiked with Tommy's elbow, "I'm sure she'd be happy to send her son some sweaters in the mail or something."

"Absolutely not."

"Why?"

"Well, for starters, I don't have a mum," Tommy bites out, waving his hands around and rolling his eyes, "Plus, I happen to work two jobs, so I have money, I don't need fuckin' people buying me things, you prick."

Wilbur blinks and Tommy can feel eyes on him with the way the man stares down at him.

"You... don't have a mum?"

"Nope," Tommy responds, shrugging a tad as if he'd said something completely normal, refusing to meet Wilbur's eyes. He tries to push down the anxiety of this, of the fact that he's let yet *another* cat out of the bag. If he acts like it's not important— and it isn't, really— then maybe Wilbur will just ignore it. "S no big deal, Wil. Just the way it is, innit?"



“Who takes care of you, then?” Wilbur whispers, sounding strangely pained.

“Nobody? Wil, I’m eighteen, remember? I don’t need anyone to take care of me.” Tommy reassures, tossing his head back a bit against the arm lining his shoulders, shooting a glare in the man’s direction.

(Something tells him he’s wrong, and something yearns to be taken care of, but he ignores it, as he always does. He doesn’t need anyone, and nobody needs him, either).

Wilbur watches him sadly, looking as though he’d like to respond, but his phone rings, interrupting their conversation. The ringtone echoes against the walls and Tommy has to curl his toes in order to not flinch at the sudden loud noise.

Tommy echoes the man’s movements, standing still and sidestepping from Wilbur’s side when the arm is removed from his shoulders so that he can properly reach into his pocket and pull his phone out to answer it.

“Techno,” he tells Tommy with a bit of a strained smile, pressing the green button and holding the phone to his ear. “Hey, Tech, I’m bringing the gremlin over— what?”

There’s a pause, and Wilbur’s eyebrows furrow a little, eyes flicking towards Tommy, who can’t help the way he shifts underneath the gaze, breath hiking in his throat.

“Right now?” Wilbur asks, and there’s a twinge of irritation to his tone. Tommy just has to hope that they aren’t talking about him despite the way the man keeps eyeing him in a strange way.

“Okay, okay— I’m— alright. I’m coming.” Wilbur says quickly into the phone, a scowl crossing his features. He quickly pulls the device from his head, pressing the red button.

“Is everything okay?” Tommy asks meekly, his breath shortening. He doesn’t really like the dark look in Wilbur’s eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine. Don’t worry, there’s just been a bit of a family emergency,” Wilbur tries to reassure, but Tommy doesn’t miss how his smile is strained a bit. Wilbur takes a step towards Tommy, who bites down on his tongue in a flare of fear. “I’m so sorry, Toms, but I’m gonna have to postpone the sleepover.”

Just my luck, something tells Tommy, and he wishes distantly that he’d just taken up Sam’s offer earlier to be taken home in his car or something. That he hadn’t let himself get jokingly ‘kidnapped’ by Wilbur.

“I have to head somewhere and make sure my family’s alright. They are, I’m sure, I just—need to know, yeah? Would you be okay with walking yourself the rest of the way home?” Wilbur tacks on, looking desperate but upset himself about the situation, eyes scanning over Tommy’s face for any sign of feeling downcast.

Tommy smiles a little at him despite the newfound fear that crawls in his stomach, hoping that somehow it brings at least a bit of comfort to the guy, “That’s totally fine, Wil. I’m a big man, I have no problem walking myself home.”

“I know, I know, I just... I worry about you,” Wilbur admits, his shoulders slumping and he smiles at Tommy, “If you want me to walk you home, I promise you, I can call up Techno right now, and—”

“Wil, it’s okay, mate,” Tommy insists, patting the man’s arm awkwardly, “You’ve got a family situation going on. I understand. I’ll be alright, yeah?”

“Okay, okay,” Wilbur responds, and there’s a pause, and then Tommy’s dragged into warm arms tightly, a chin landing on his head, “Please take care of yourself, Toms. If you need me, don’t hesitate to call. I will be here as quickly as I can.”

Tommy smiles, but finds it’s bittersweet.

“Thanks, Wil,” he murmurs in response, “I’ll see you later, alright?”

And with that, the warmth is gone too soon, leaving Tommy standing alone, feeling as though he had been doused in ice.

## Chapter End Notes

i hate this chapter w/ a passion but i wrote it literally just so i could say “haha look at the word count”. apologies if it isn’t too pogchamp<3 i’m burnt out

butterflies!tommy is going through it as per usual. i promised a bit of hurt/comfort & hav delivered

wilbur’s kinda sus . smirks and plays among us theme

back to my break :) see you around<3

# **no i don't want to build a bear, r u insane? bonkers, mayhaps?**

## Chapter Summary

This sucks.

This positively and absolutely fucking sucks.

If there was a word to describe being reverse “chuffed to bits”, that would be him right now.

“What the fuck,” Tommy deadpans, staring at the big sign that reads ‘Build-a-Bear,’ before whipping around to glare at Tubbo, “Tubbo, Tubs, Tubster, you know that I love you like a best friend, but what the fuck is this?”

or, take ur benchtrio content , some small plot, & vague crimeboys content & go ! <3

## Chapter Notes

spongebob turned into a clown & no one ever wants to dance with a fool who went and ripped his pants

rip 69420 words, gone but not forgotten/lh

---

tws: talk of death & death jokes, mentions of dead stuffed animals / cruelty towards stuffed animal jokes, derealization, cuts & scarring, mentions of blood, mild feelings of self hatred, & mild *platonic* possessive behaviour!

as always, everything is /platonic !!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Is... is that *my* axolotl?” Tubbo asks, expression aghast as he looks at Oswald swimming around in his tank on the kitchen countertop.

Tommy glances over and just hums.

“No, that’s my axolotl, and his name is Oswald,” Tommy responds calmly, situating himself on the carpeted floor beside Ranboo, who’s already frowning at the boy’s hair. How has it only been a couple weeks (give or take) and Tommy’s red tips are already turning a pinkish colour?

“No, I’m pretty sure that’s my axolotl, boss man,” Tubbo insists, stepping closer to the tank with something dangerous on his face. He glances over at Tommy, who isn’t paying attention to him in the slightest, scrolling through Ranboo’s phone absentmindedly.

It’s become a habit to just ruin Ranboo’s Netflix algorithm whenever they come over. This has quickly become Tommy’s favourite pastime other than irritating his coworker, Jack, at Nook’s.

“Pretty sure that the creepy emo from the nineteenth century who comes to Eldritch Wings gave me that axolotl, Tubster,” Tommy finalizes without much care, clicking on a random movie title that looks scary on Netflix and propping it up against a couple wrinkled clothes tossed on the floor.

“Wilbur?” Ranboo speaks up suddenly, pausing the way their fingers had been running through Tommy’s curls, tone a little strange as he says the man’s name.

“Yep,” Tommy pops the ‘p’, crossing his legs and watching the movie, “So you know him, too?”

“I guess you could say that,” Ranboo mutters, casting a strange glance in Tubbo’s direction, who doesn’t seem too fazed by this information, plopping down on the sofa.

“That’s ominous,” Tommy comments brightly, still keeping his main focus on the movie playing. Ranboo continues to run his hands through the boy’s hair, deciding to not comment any further.

“You have terrible self preservation skills, Tommy,” Tubbo chimes in suddenly, laying upside down on the sofa again (it’s yet another thing that has become second nature whenever they visit Tommy’s apartment). Tubbo even pulls his phone out, beginning to scroll through it absentmindedly.

“Says the guy who sits on a sofa fuckin’ *upside down* n’ shit. You— you know that all the blood could rush to your skull and you could just die, you do know that, right?” Tommy quips, casting a glare in Tubbo’s direction.

Tubbo just hums in response, turning up his phone’s volume as the sound of *Mario Kart: Pocket Edition* sounds as background noise over the ambience of Tommy’s apartment (and whatever horror movie he’s turned on).

Tommy exhales in mild irritation, securing his knees to his chest and leaning his head back a bit as Ranboo twists his fingers through it, braiding the curls that just barely make out a mullet with precision.

The two of them had insisted on coming over all night, ever since Tommy had called Tubbo while walking home alone and nearly gave the guy a heart attack when he said that he thought he was gonna get jumped again or something.

It wasn’t like he was scared or anything, obviously. Tommy never got scared, just mildly inconvenienced. It would be really terrible if he didn’t write a will before he died, so that’s basically what he did on the phone with Tubbo, while Ranboo panicked in the background.

Nonetheless, given the situation, there was literally no chance of Tommy getting out of the fact that Ranboo and Tubbo were coming over and staying for a day or two. He just had to

suck it up and deal with it for now (although he'd never admit that he kind of enjoyed the company).

Tommy had to admit, though, it was a bit nice to have someone to talk to on the way home after Wilbur's strange disappearance. The guy still hadn't called him, either, which just made him all the more nervous. He just had to hope whatever family emergency was going on wasn't too serious.

(Not as though he cared for them or anything; it would just be another one of those classic mild inconveniences if Tommy had one less part time job).

"Tommy's right, Tubbo, you're literally gonna fall if you keep laying like that," Ranboo scolds suddenly over Tommy's head to his friend, hands pausing in the boy's hair to begin a second braid on the other side of his head, starting right above his ear.

"No, I'm not," Tubbo comments lightly.

"I— Tubbo, please, for the sake of my sanity, sit normally?"

"Can't right now, boss man. I'm kicking Luigi's ass so far into the ground. Fucker didn't know what was coming to him."

Ranboo hums in disapproval, still gently weaving strands of Tommy's hair as he talks, "Why Luigi? He's the one I always play."

Tubbo laughs darkly, and Tommy has to hide his smile in his knees, watching the characters on Ranboo's phone talk with one another, eyes skimming the captions on the bottom of the screen.

(He can never watch anything without captions; it always bothers him not being able to decipher what the people are saying, even if he can hear them).

“I don’t like the look on your face right now, Tubbo,” Ranboo admits nervously, his fingers quickening in Tommy’s hair.

“Why are you playing the Pocket Edition version of *Mario Kart* anyways, Tubs?” Tommy comments now, eyeing the kid, “Don’t you work at like, Tech Support for some big company or something? You can’t tell me you haven’t got the money for a Switch and the proper game.”

Tubbo clicks his tongue, “Pocket Edition is superior.”

“You’re joking. Please tell me you’re lying.”

“You play the Pocket Edition of *Animal Crossing* and you don’t see me making fun of you,” Tubbo goads, not even glancing Tommy’s way when the boy gasps dramatically.

“Don’t you even fuckin’ *compare* the PE version of *Animal Crossing* to the PE version of *Mario Kart*, you bastard,” Tommy drawls, turning with his chin stuck out to watch the random Netflix show playing on Ranboo’s phone again. “Plus, did I have to pay for an early release of *my* mobile game? No, nope, no sir.”

Tubbo doesn’t respond, the little sounds from Mario Kart echoing off of Tommy’s rather empty apartment walls giving enough of an answer.

Tommy takes this as a win, remaining quiet with an air of superiority. Ranboo decides, as per usual, to stay out of it.

Two people on Ranboo’s phone screen start screaming out of nowhere and Tommy cringes a little at the abrupt noise, curling his knees more into his chest.



Almost like it was meant to be, the sound of Luigi yelping suddenly echoes the screams on the phone, and then the triumphant noises of a first place victory emit from Tubbo's phone as he finishes the last lap.

"I've done it. I've killed him," Tubbo announces calmly, dropping his phone onto the sofa.

"You just finished the race," Ranboo corrects, sounding a tad exasperated.

"No, I've killed him."

Ranboo sighs.

---

Wilbur curses his luck that tonight had to be the night that Techno and Phil got themselves in some sort of scuffle with the heroes.

Out of all the ones, it just had to be when he was already on edge. Although he was certain that Tommy would probably be alright (given there weren't any villains on the prowl for the kid, he had made sure of that), it still didn't help ease his anxiety.

After the short battle — really, it had just seemed like some sort of dumb jest from Morpheus, who almost acted like he enjoyed toying with the "villains" before disappearing into the night — Wilbur stood atop a roof, pacing angrily.

Techno was sat off to the right, staring at the exact spot Morpheus had disappeared in, as though expecting the hero to magically reappear.

(Any other day, Wilbur would be right there with him, but today felt distinctly different. *Chilling*, almost).

A hand runs down his arm kindly, and he flinches, turning to face Phil, who watches him with a look of concern.

“Doing alright, mate?” the man asks, voice calm despite the scar that afflicts just below his jaw; a “victorious marking” from the notorious Morpheus himself, who had laid it on the man just before Wilbur showed up.

“Just thinking,” Wilbur admits, voice strained.

“About...?” Phil raises his eyebrows.

Wilbur doesn’t respond; honestly, he doesn’t have to. Phil’s known for a while now how far his worry for Tommy really lies. It’s almost worrying how quickly the man’s gotten attached to the kid.

“I’m sure he’s just fine, mate,” Phil reassures, giving his son a calm smile, eyes flicking over cautiously in Techno’s direction, who had just slumped down to wipe blood off of his axe. “Tommy’s a self-proclaimed ‘big man,’ Wil. He can make it a night on his own.”

“Yeah, but...” Wilbur makes a face, “Phil, I don’t... I don’t know, man, there’s just... what if he gets jumped on the way home again? What if something happens to him that I could’ve prevented by staying by his side?”

“It’s not your fault, Wil, if anything does happen— not that anything will, of course,” Phil quickly adds, noticing the way Wilbur quickly glances towards the edge of the building, as though thinking about dashing in Tommy’s direction. “Techno called you in for back up. It’s not your fault, alright?”

Wilbur exhales, giving his father a bit of a strained smile, patting the hand that sits on his shoulder comfortingly, “... Alright.”

Phil just smiles warmly at him, tilting his head, “Here, how about this? I’ll call up Tubbo and request him to check how Tommy’s doing. Maybe he can take him out to do something fun.”

Wilbur visibly relaxes more, shoulders unwinding and letting out a breath of air, “That... would be great, actually.”

Phil drops his hand from Wilbur’s shoulder, stepping away to pull his phone out, “We have to head back home after this. Call Captain and let her know about what Morpheus is doing; hopefully she will be able to track his movements better with Nemesis as well.”

Wilbur nods solemnly, stepping away as Phil pulls his phone to his ear and slumping down on the gravel beside his twin brother, who is staring intently at the moonlight reflecting off of his blade.

“You alright?” he asks, keeping his tone quiet, flitting his eyes in his twin’s direction.

Call him insane, but he’s always been certain that he and Techno share a sort of “twin sense”. It’s a myth, obviously, that twins can read one another’s minds, but it always feels strangely real with Techno.

One look at his brother’s face, and he can almost see the wheels in his head turning, a plan formulating, or (more commonly) a bloodbath waiting to happen. His face screams apathy to anyone who doesn’t know him and anticipation to those who do.

(Always prepared for a fight. Always).

Wilbur’s one of the lucky few that can typically understand one bored, deadpanned looking Techno from the other.

“Thinking,” Techno responds plainly, clicking his jaw a tad.

Wilbur suppresses a smile— that makes two of them, then.

“About the fight?” Wilbur asks, even though it isn’t much of a question. His brother was always thinking about a fight, even if it was one that had happened years ago (his favourite to reminisce about was the one that had only occurred about two years ago, back when Morpheus still had his little protégé).

“Hmm,” Techno responds, not facing his brother, turning the handle of his axe over in his hands.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“There isn’t much to say,” Techno mutters darkly, jaw clicking again, “Just strange how... planned everything feels.”

“What do you mean?” Wilbur frowns now, and that uneasy feeling is back, curling at the pit of his stomach. The one he’d felt for years, the one that would wake him up in the middle of the night, whispering to him that nothing was real, that the ‘heroes always died in this one.’

He never understood it. He still doesn’t.

It was just a feeling, of course.

Nothing more.

“Morpheus,” Techno says the name with something strange in his tone, almost venomous in a way that makes Wilbur frown.

The two weren’t exactly enemies— they weren’t friends, either. *Rivals*, if you asked the Manberg press, who found the two extremely entertaining, in some sort of sick, capitalistic way.

Despite how creepy Morpheus had always stuck to to be, Techno usually spoke of the hero in a weird, almost admirable way. Never like this.

“What about him...?” Wilbur begins, eyes flicking towards his father and the small scar he’d earned from the hero. “Is it that he hurt Phil—?”

“It’s planned,” Techno interjects. “Everything about him is too...”

His twin trails off, but Wilbur almost feels as though he understands exactly what he means.

Morpheus was a hero of grandeur; everything about him was pieced together to make him look perfect to the general public of Manberg. Hell, even the President (or, well, *Mayor*, in literal terms) of Manberg deemed Morpheus as the “face of their great city”.

Everything about the hero was almost too perfect to be true.

It felt... organized.

As though someone had planted the seed of a flawless hero and grew it with golden water.

Everyone had their flaws, though. It was a fact of life. Wilbur had his (possessiveness, clearly, and his downward spirals into the deep caverns of his head that lasted far too long).

As far as he knew, almost *every* other hero had theirs as well.

Hell, even all of Morpheus’ teammates had their little weaknesses.

And yet, Morpheus had none.

If you looked past the estranged rumours that the hero had killed his previous sidekick (*“protégé,”* Techno had corrected once), then you’d find a pristine, pressure washed hero with no faults.

A squeaky clean record and a massive smiley face that made the public happy, as though the grin was contagious.

The inevitable mystery of it all was really too good to not solve.

Wilbur slowly meets Techno’s eyes and the two share a secret agreement.

The upcoming “party”; a perfect opportunity to pull the hero apart by the seams and find out just what makes him tick.

If nothing else, he had hurt Phil, after all.

---

Tommy yawns, leaning heavily against Ranboo as the three walk down the halls in the shopping mall, glaring at all the heavily saturated “Clearance Sale” signs that they walk past.

“Out of all things we could possibly be doing today,” Tommy grumbles, glaring at Tubbo, who has bounded ahead, eyes glittering at the shop that’s labeled Game, “Did we seriously have to choose to go to the fucking mall?”

“What’s wrong with the mall?” Ranboo asks, frowning down at the boy, who looks up to glare in their direction.

“Literally everything,” Tommy hisses, motioning outwards with his hands, as if that explains anything. “There’s just— there’s so many fucking people and the prices are so expensive! Do you know how many Jaffa Cakes I could buy for the price of one jumper in H&M?”

Ranboo snorts, then frowns again, “What’s a Jaffa Cake?”

Tommy pauses, mimicking Ranboo’s expression.

“You— you’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not British, Tommy.”

Wait.

What?

“You’re not?”

“What the— are you being serious right now?” Ranboo blinks a little, full on stopping in the middle of the walkway to stare at Tommy in disbelief.

“Yes, I’m being so completely slash es are es,” Tommy hisses out, his ears turning a bright shade of red that matches the tips of his hair, “No, I’m not being serious, I definitely already knew that, I was— I was just testing you, big man.”

“Testing... to see if I would know my own nationality,” Ranboo deadpans.

“Yes,” Tommy responds, crossing his arms over his chest proudly, “You— you can be quite forgetful, you know, big man, I just had to make sure—”

“I wouldn’t forget where I’m *from*—”

“*Mememe*, that’s what you sound like, did you know? God, you’re insufferable, Ranboo. It’s a wonder that Tubbo hasn’t divorced you yet.”

“He has, actually. But in a technical standard, he can’t.” Ranboo mutters nervously as the two start walking in the direction of the Game store, where they can see Tubbo leaning over the table, arguing with the store clerk about something.

“Why’s that?” Tommy asks, the corner of his mouth twitching when Tubbo throws a DVD case at the clerk and storms out of the store in their general direction.

“Because we adopted a child together and it would probably be morally wrong.” Ranboo admits nonchalantly, staring in concern as the boy walks in their direction angrily.

Tommy pauses and slowly turns to the man, tone full of horror,

“I beg your pardon?”

---

“You— you’re gonna have to run that by me again,” Tommy whispers exhaustedly, running his hands down his face, slumping forwards against the table.

Across from him, Ranboo glances nervously at Tubbo, who is too distracted by the Happy Meal he’d gotten from McDonald’s to really care about aiding his platonic husband in this conversation.

“We, erm,” Ranboo scratches the back of his neck, “We adopted a child?”



“A real child?”

“It’s a baby puppy?” Ranboo offers, voice lilting a tad, casting a glance in Tubbo’s direction again, eyes practically begging for some assistance. He gets nothing.

“How is that a fucking child, though?” Tommy whispers, clasping his hands together calmly, feeling on the verge of positively falling apart. He wonders if this is what it’s like to have children. Distantly, he makes a mental note to apologize to Phil for his struggles of being a parent.

“It’s... well...” Ranboo tilts his head and grimaces. They aren’t quite sure where to go with this.

“Just— *Jesus*, mate, next time explicitly tell me that it’s a fucking *dog* or something. Don’t make me actually believe you’ve adopted a child, asshat. I was almost concerned that I’d have to like— I don’t know, *coun-sell* you both on how to take care of a literal *human*. ” Tommy grumbles, setting his head down onto his crossed arms.

At this rate, he’s gonna get gray hairs before he’s even sixteen. That’s gotta be a world record.

Ranboo smiles nervously, patting the table a little, “Yeah, yep. No problem. Next time, then. Maybe not the, uh... *counselling*, though.”

There’s an awkward silence — Tubbo takes the opportunity to start playing *Mario Kart PE* again, much to Tommy’s despair — and yet, Tommy still feels strangely... at peace, in a weird sort of way.

Just being here, in the food court of a mall, sitting across from Tubbo and Ranboo and surrounded by busy people, it’s almost peaceful. Strange how things work out that way when usually he fucking hates the mall.

Shopping is always a terrible experience for him, especially when there's a lot of people. It only gets worse when they're around his age.

The mall in particular is swarmed with that 'genre' of people. Tommy hates it, normally. (At the very least, Ranboo let him borrow their mask for this trip).

Even so, it's nice, in a weird way, just being *here*, occasionally bantering with the two like they're old school friends. Even being forced to hear the dumb little sounds of *Mario Kart PE* and smell McDonald's somewhat adds to the experience.

(If he squints and truly thinks about it, it almost feels like, just for a second, he can truly be a normal fifteen year old without having to pretend. He figures that if Ranboo weren't watching him cautiously, he might even smile).

---

Fuck all those dumb, positive feelings that Tommy was having before.

This sucks.

This positively and absolutely fucking *sucks*.

If there was a word to describe being reverse "chuffed to bits", that would be him right now.

"What the fuck," Tommy deadpans, staring at the big sign that reads 'Build-a-Bear,' before whipping around to glare at Tubbo, "Tubbo, Tubs, Tubster, you know that I love you like a best friend, but what the fuck is this?"

“You haven’t been here before?” Tubbo asks, putting on a pitiful expression that makes Tommy recoil.

“No, I haven’t— don’t give me that look, it’s not like it’s some big deal like never having Jaffa Cakes. It’s just another stuffed... stuffed animal store or whatever the fuck this is.” Tommy bristles quickly, motioning towards Ranboo, who is awkwardly holding a small bag containing Jaffa Cakes that Tommy peer pressured him into buying.

“We’re gonna change that.” Tubbo announces, grinning maliciously and grabbing Tommy’s hand, pulling him into the store even as the boy tries to pull away. When it proves futile, he starts using extreme measures, aka giving Ranboo the classic ‘puppy dog eyes’ to try and goad him into helping.

(Ranboo just holds his hands up in mock surrender, deciding it’s best if he just stays out of this debacle again. Wise decision, really).

“What the *fuck* is that.” Tommy whispers once Tubbo’s dragged him inside the store, looking positively appalled as he stares into a bin full of what looks like deflated stuffed animals.

“The skins of your future new friend.” Tubbo whispers ominously. He squints at the mannequins sitting above each station, trying to decide which one he’s gonna get.

Tommy shudders.

“Fuck’s wrong with you? Did you really have to say it like that?”

Tubbo hums, picking up one of the deflated things (Tommy internally salutes for the dead stuffed animal, may it rest in peace).

“Pick one out.” the boy just says when Tommy looks at him again in dismay.

“What—? No, I’m not participating in your weird, almost— almost *cult-like* shit, big man,” Tommy responds, whipping his head around to search for Ranboo (who was the main source of Tubbo’s self control), but the guy was long gone.

Probably got out of there while they still could, the absolute prick.

“You have to,” Tubbo says, grinning horrifically at Tommy.

Now, Tommy’s very cool and mature n’ shit. Nothing scares him literally ever. He’s too swag to get scared.

But Tubbo... the kid has always been a special case.

“Yep, alright, okay,” Tommy laughs nervously. He snatches the first thing he sees, holding it out so Tubbo can get a good look at it and know that he’s participating. “See, king? I’ve got one now, so you don’t have to murder me in my sleep, yeah?”

Tubbo clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth, rounding on his heel. “We’ll see.”

Tommy’s heart drops. “Oh, piss off.”

---

Tommy walks out of the store twenty minutes later, looking down in horror (but also in a bit amazement) at the now fully stuffed and *talking* sheep in his hands.

When he was asked if he wanted to put some weird voice into his stuffed animal, he had never said yes so quickly in his life.

Now his new sheep “friend” said ‘poggers’.

It was awful.

“This should be illegal,” he mutters to Tubbo, who walks out of the store carrying a stuffed goat. “This— that was fucking horrifying, you realize that, right?”

“It was fun!” Tubbo insists with a bright grin, and Tommy can’t bring himself to argue. After all, Tubbo had bought him this monstrosity of a stuffed animal (threatening to pick him up and toss him through the plexiglass in front of the store if he didn’t let him).

Tommy tries for a shaky smile in return, “Haha, yeah, big man... it was.”

Tubbo’s grin widens and he links his arm with Tommy’s, the two walking in sync down the walkways of the mall.

“Where’s Ranboo gone?” Tommy asks, even though he definitely doesn’t care. Not at all. Maybe the guy just disappeared or something.

“I think he went to apologize to that employee I threatened in Game,” Tubbo says calmly, taking a right around a corner.

Tommy snorts, “Oh yeah, I’d nearly forgotten about that when your *beloved* fucking lied to me about you two having a child. Why’d you threaten the poor guy?”

“They told me that they didn’t have *The Sims 4* in stock,” Tubbo responds darkly, huffing a tad and hugging his new stuffed goat in his free arm tightly.

“How... so you threw a random CD case at them just because they didn’t have some game in stock?”

“No, I threw a copy of *The Sims 4* CD that I found on the back wall at them,” Tubbo responds, tone edging on something almost smug.

Tommy frowns, “But weren’t they just an employee trying to—?”

“Do their job? No, it was the dumbass manager. The one behind it all. The Big M, if you will.”

“Ah,” Tommy nods accordingly, “The Jeffrey Bezos behind the corporation. I get you.”

“You’re thinking CEO, Big T.”

“No, I don’t think I am.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“No, false. I’m thinking of Jeffrey.”

Tubbo rolls his eyes but just smiles, “Alright. You’re thinking of Jeffrey.”

---

As expected, things go to shit again.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Tommy deadpans, staring at Wilbur, who smiles down at him from the front entrance of the mall.

He's all wrapped up in warm clothing. He looks even *more* like a stupid poet. Pretentious asshole.

(Not that he would admit it out loud, but Tommy was actually a bit glad to see the man; he had been a little worried the night before about the whole family emergency thing).

"It's great to see you too, Tommy." Wilbur huffs. Tommy narrows his eyes, debating for a moment about retorting in annoyance, but his curiosity overrules his other thoughts.

"How, uh... how did the family emergency go?" Tommy bluntly asks, clearing his throat a little.

"Fine, fine! Everything's alright," Wilbur reassures. He gives a little smile, adding on almost pridefully, "Nothing to worry about, if you were."

"I wasn't, I wasn't! I'm just a curious man, Wilbur, you know me." Tommy defends immediately, hands raising in the air.

"Sure, sure, of course." Wilbur hums in a way that makes Tommy's face contort.

"So why are you here, anyways? Are you stalking me now or something? Cuz that's super weird of you, you know." Tommy says, narrowing his eyes. Ranboo coughs beside him, concealing a laugh. He's nearly forgotten that the guy was there. Whoops.

He turns to shoot Ranboo a look and they back up a little cautiously, pulling Tubbo with them.

Tubbo keeps an eye on both Wilbur and Tommy even as he's being pulled away, almost looking strangely intrigued in a way that makes Tommy shift a bit uncomfortably.

“I’m not stalking you, Tommy, *Jesus*, ” Wilbur continues once Ranboo and Tubbo have walked off, Ranboo giving Tommy a *we’ll wait on you* look, “I was just running in to the mall to buy some Christmas presents. Of all people, I didn’t expect to see *you* here, Mr. I-Only-Leave-The-House-for-Work.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever helps you sleep at night,” Tommy waves the man off, barely even looking as Ranboo and Tubbo stand off to the side a tad, “Also, I *do* leave my house for other things than work, you just don’t happen to see me because you’re a rich bastard that lives in the *suburbs*.”

Wilbur chuckles warmly, reaching out to ruffle Tommy’s hair, “Well, it’s good I’ve found you, then. I was meaning to call you, after all.”

Tommy bats the man’s hand away indignantly, grimacing, “Oh fuck off, I just got my hair redone, you actual prick.”

“I noticed! It looks nice with the little braid crown.” Wilbur comments, tone all kind and shit the way he gets when he’s being all sappy. Tommy hates it.

“Fuck you, don’t patronize me,” Tommy quips, his tone dipping into a grumble before his eyebrows furrow, “Wait, call me about what?”

“Well, you missed our most recent family sleepover 2.0 because of the emergency I had to deal with,” Wilbur begins, shrugging a tad as he rocks onto his heels and then to his toes, tilting his head and grinning. “So I was gonna call and see if you wanted to reschedule for sometime this weekend.”

Tommy blinks.

“Wait— really?”

Wilbur grins, “Yeah, of course. Phil and Techno have missed you being around, you know.”



*I did, too*, went unsaid, but the corners of Tommy's mouth quirked up a tad as if he'd heard it.

"I only just stayed the night like, a week ago," Tommy says, tilting his head, "Am I that much of an integral part to the whole esteemed 'family dynamic' now?"

"Of course you are," Wilbur says, tone so genuine that it makes Tommy feel like someone has squeezed his heart, "You're my little brother now, didn't you know?"

"Fuck off." Tommy snorts, elbowing the man in the side with his free arm.

"By the way," Wilbur begins, and Tommy's face falls immensely at how smug he sounds again, "Is that a stuffed sheep you got there, Toms?"

Tommy's heart drops.

He'd nearly forgotten about his 'new friend'.

"Fuck you, fuck off, I'm gonna leave you all by yourself now and go hang out with my *real* friends," Tommy carps, shoving past the man to walk back over to Ranboo and Tubbo.

"Aww, no, Tommy, come back, will you?" Wilbur faux complains, reaching out to grab the boy's arm and tug him back. When Tommy looks back to glare at him, the man's grinning smugly. "I think it's sweet, man. Nothing embarrassing about it. Even Techno's got a stuffed animal back home."

Tommy rolls his eyes. His ears feel like they're on fire at this point. There's no way in absolute hell that *Techno* has a stuffed animal. Wilbur's just saying that to make him feel better, the absolute prick.

“Can I see him?” Wilbur asks suddenly, holding his hands out and smiling.

“Oh sure, but if you don’t give him back, expect Tubbo to hunt you down and steal your eyes or something.” Tommy responds sweetly, plopping the sheep into Wilbur’s upturned hands.

“Wouldn’t expect any less from him,” Wilbur hums, looking over the stuffed animal fondly. His eyes flicker up to Tommy’s. “Have you got a name for him yet?”

Tommy blinks. “No? Should I?”

“Obviously. The best part about having a stuffed animal is naming them.” Wilbur says, poking the boy in the forehead and handing the sheep back to him.

*I wouldn’t know*, Tommy thinks bitterly, looking down at the sheep with a strange feeling boiling in his chest. It’s a bit weird, the sudden realization that this is practically his first stuffed animal. It isn’t technically true, but it feels correct.

“I can’t think of any good names,” Tommy admits, “I used them all up on Oswald and your dumb little stolen river water jar.”

“Which, by the way, is thriving.” Wilbur comments astutely.

“Yeah, Pogtopia better be fucking thriving, or else I might have to kill you.” Tommy grumbles. It’s kind of a joke, but also kind of not a joke.

Wilbur snorts, rolling his eyes and standing up straight, “I wouldn’t ask any less of you, Tommy.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Tommy exhales, “Uh, Wil, before I go…”

“Mhm?”

“Can you do me a favour?”

Wilbur smiles at him, expression incredibly kind. It’s really not something Tommy is used to. He figures that he should be, by now— Sam and Phil have worn the exact same expressions — but he’s not. He can’t fathom it, no matter how hard he tries.

“What’s up?” the man asks, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Could you, uh, help me name it?” Tommy mutters, ducking his head down so he doesn’t have to see the man’s expression, holding up the stuffed animal again.

“Aw, Tommy,” Wilbur teases, tone gentle in a way that it makes Tommy feel like punching him in the nose, “Of *course*—”

Tommy steps on his foot instead. He doesn’t really feel like getting kicked out of the shopping center for socking some tall bitch in the face. Tubbo would do it, but Tommy would miss the pretzel stand.

Either way, he won’t be having a sappy Wilbur today. Gross.

“Ow— fucking— what the hell was that for?!” Wilbur hisses, hopping on one foot a little and glaring in the kid’s direction.

“Don’t fuckin’ ‘*aww*’ at me. I’m not a baby.”

“Gremlin,” Wilbur exhales, gritting his teeth and shaking his foot out a bit, standing up properly, “I hate you.”

“Sure you do, pal,” Tommy deadpans, rolling his eyes. What a loser. “Now could you please name my sheep so I can leave and not see your dumb face again for a while?”

“Fine, fine, holy shit—” Wilbur frowns a little, examining the sheep, eyes laying on the tag attached to its side, “Uh, how about ‘Friend?’”

“What? Why Friend? That’s a shit name.”

“You asked me to name it, so I did!” Wilbur responds, looking close to throwing his hands in the air.

“Great, whatever, pogchamp or something.” Tommy sends a thumbs-up, turning on his heel to return to his friends. “Bye bye, Wilbur Soot! Have fun Christmas shopping, you asshat!”

“I’m going to stuff you into a box and ship you away to Canada.” Wilbur hisses as he watches the boy leave.

Tommy snorts, not turning around as he replies with a sharp, “Sick.”

---

“What did Wil want?” Tubbo asks, linking his arm with Tommy’s right and (after peer pressure from Tubbo), Ranboo linking his with Tommy’s left.

“To irritate me, obviously,” Tommy responds with a shrug, grimacing at the cold bite of air that hits him in the face when they walk out the double doors. It looks like it might rain today...

“Hmm,” Tubbo says, “Did he like your Build-a-Bear?”

“Yeah, but he was being a right bitch about it,” Tommy grumbles, staring down at his feet as the three walk down the pavement. “He did tell me what to name it, though. But he doesn’t get any of the credit. I get full credit. I named it.”

Tubbo hums in response.

“What’s it’s name, then?”

“Well, actually, now that I’m thinking about it, I am gonna say Wilbur named it, cuz it’s such a shit name—” Tommy begins.

Ranboo yelps suddenly, though, and the three all simultaneously stop walking; Tommy frowns up at the guy when he pulls their hand from Tommy’s, holding both of their hands up to their forehead like they’ve just been stabbed or something.

“You okay, big man?” Tommy asks, feeling Tubbo tense a little beside him.

“I, uh... it’s raining,” Ranboo admits, blinking sheepishly and touching a fingertip to his forehead, “It freaked me out. Sorry.”

“No biggie,” Tommy smiles reassuringly, reaching out to pat the way too tall guy on the back, his shoulders relaxing, “It happens to the best of us, king.”

“My weather app didn’t say it would rain today,” Tubbo hums, sounding thoroughly disappointed.

“I figured it would rain. Dark clouds, innit?” Tommy states, almost proud that he’d outsmarted a weather app.

Tubbo just continues to frown before holding out his hand, palm-side up, waiting for a moment before something falls slowly from the sky, melting into his palm after a second.

“No, no, it’s *snow*, dumbass,” Tubbo says with a snort, turning to grin widely at Ranboo and Tommy, “The radar said it would snow, that’s why I was confused.”

“That— snow’s just rain but frozen?” Ranboo responds, frowning. “It’s technically the same thing, Tubbo.”

“No, it’s not,” Tubbo responds, voice lilting in the way it usually does when he’s preparing to argue. “One is frozen, boss man, the other’s *not*...”

Tommy blinks, tuning out the two’s bickering to hold out his own hand. He feels like ice has been poured through his veins, rich and cold as he watches something small fall onto his hand and then melt.

His mouth dries and he swallows thickly, recalling how Wilbur had said he was out to go *Christmas shopping*.

Maybe it’s time that he starts paying more attention to a calendar.

## Chapter End Notes

butterflies!tommy at the mall: this day is great ! i love being with my friends  
gigglechamp !

butterflies!tommy, seconds later: i have seen hell. it opened its doors and Spoke to me. i  
will never be the same

hi guys ! hi hello ! i’m alive!

i apologize for how shit this chapter is hjshjdhdjf, i’ve got severe writer’s block rn & im  
super sick :(( but /gen i apologize for the long wait but i am here ! promises for angst &  
plot soon/hj, this filler chapter was j kinda necessary <3

(note: in writing this i accidentally deleted chapters 13-18 of this fic in my google docs.  
i am officially cursed)

# ah shit, the cat's out of the bag.. kind of

## Chapter Summary

“I get it,” Techno interjects, and Tommy clicks his jaw shut, thankful for an opportunity to just *stop*.

It’s quiet for a moment, and then Techno continues, “It’s just a bit rare to see civilians who don’t pick a side.”

Tommy gives him a bit of a wry smile, “Guess I’m a first, then.”

The corner of Techno’s mouth twitches, “You’re definitely a first.”

or, come take ur bedrock bros, 4/4, crimeboys, & vague plot content & go ! uh, also. whoops lmao

## Chapter Notes

weirdest mcc dunks mind blown emoji

i wrote this chapter while half awake. enjoy crack <3

---

tw: derealization, self-deprecating thoughts, mild mentions of sh, mentions of murder but in a /j way, & platonic possessive behaviour, talk of alcohol / mentions of underaged drinking, implications of child neglect / past child abuse, talk of dead parents

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)



Tommy hums, leaning his head onto the warm glass on his right, watching warily as Techno situates himself across the table from him.

They were sat in “Tommy’s Corner”, aka *the best place in the entirety of Eldritch Wings (besides Phil’s office)*, if you asked Tommy personally. It was just a simple little part of the highest floor in the bookstore with nothing more than a little table and chairs.

There was a large bay window attached that looked out over the rooftops of Manberg and sometimes Tommy wondered what it would be like if he had the graveyard shift here instead of the morning one; what it would be like to watch the sunset over a horizon like this.

“So, uh...” Techno begins, sounding mildly confused, hands fumbling on the table with themselves as he tries to figure out something to do with them, “What... story would you like to hear today, then?”

Tommy smiles a little; when Techno had arrived at the bookstore earlier (not in the company of Wilbur for once, which was a little strange but who cares, Techno’s the favourite anyways), Tommy had quite literally begged him to tell another Greek story.

Well, not begged.

Just profusely asked over and over again until he said yes.

It’s definitely not because he wanted company or anything. Of course not. It was just... nice to hear the stories from someone that wasn’t an automated voice over Audiobook. A lot more interesting, if you will.

“Not sure,” Tommy admits with a shrug, turning his head to look out the window again. He can see a little family walking down the sidewalk near the center of the city. He bites his tongue so he doesn’t smile. “Just any you want to tell me, big man.”

“Alright,” Techno exhales, his chair creaking when he leans back in it, thinking. “We’ve gone over the Arachne story already?”

“Twice, actually.”

“Uh... what about Hercules?”

“Oh, no, no, please not *Hercules*. That one’s so *meta*, Techno,” Tommy responds, scrunching his nose up in distaste. “If you don’t know that one, you’re properly shit.”

Techno’s silent for a moment, dragging a hand down the side of his face. He’s pulled his hair back today into a bun. It’s cool. Very cool, actually. Tommy’s only partially jealous.

“Please never call the story of Hercules ‘meta’ again, Tommy,” the man murmurs, exasperation hinting in his tone.

“What? Why? It’s true, innit?” Tommy begins, smirking a tad, “Are you a Hercules stan or something? Kinda weirdchamp of you.”

“Tommy.”

“Imagine, being a stan of someone from like, 300 years ago, especially fuckin’ *Hercules*. Couldn’t be me.”

“Tommy.”

Tommy snorts at the pained expression on Techno’s face, deciding to spare him from any further jests, leaning his chin into his hand with a hum, “Alright, what about this? Have you ever seen the Disney movie *Hercules* before, big man? That explains it properly well, so I don’t exactly need a refresher.”

Techno exhales longly.

“Of course I’ve seen it, but it’s Disney, Tommy, they’re not gonna include *everythin*’—”

“Yeah, yeah, just— pick someone else and make sure they’re actually interesting, please,” Tommy interrupts, grinning wildly at Techno as the man stares at him in exhaustion.

“I regret coming in today,” the man admits and Tommy frowns, taking more offense from this than he should.

“What the hell? It wasn’t like I *asked* you to come in or anything, bitch.”

“You’re right, *you* didn’t,” Techno grumbles, leaning forwards onto the table, chin propped up in his hand, mimicking the way that Tommy is sitting.

Before Tommy can ask anything more, Techno adds, “Alright, how’s this— have you heard the tale of Perseus?”

Tommy grimaces; he hasn’t, but he definitely doesn’t like how they’ve begun to dwell into the names ending in “seus’s” now.

“No,” he admits, despite himself, and Techno visibly relaxes a little.

“Alright. Okay,” Techno straightens the glasses on his nose, “We’re gonna talk about Perseus today, then.”

“I change my mind, he kinda sounds like a bitch, actually.”

“Tommy.”

“Am I wrong?”

“No, you— Tommy, most of the Greek heroes are notorious for being morally wrong.”

Tommy winces, even though he knows it wasn't directed at him.

“Yeah, well,” Tommy drums his fingers on the table, looking at the way the sunlight glints on the gold rings layered on each of Techno's fingers. “Not all of them were *bad*, though.”

“Who can you think of that didn't have a flaw?”

“Well, uh...” Tommy blinks a little, glancing to his right where he can look out the window.

Honestly, he can't recall many Greek myths except for the ones that were practically drilled into his head for years.

(Those are ones he would rather not talk about).

“What about... Icarus? The guy who flew too close to the sun or something? He wasn't, uh, ‘morally wrong’ or anything. He was just kinda stupid.”

“Power,” Techno responds gruffly, “and ego, Tommy. It dissuaded him, just as it does many.”

“Right, but does that really make him a bad person? Just because he decided to...” Tommy trails off, grumbling a little. His memory's a bit blurry when it comes to the tale of Icarus, admittedly, but he remembers it being one of his favourites to hear about.

That must be why he can't remember it despite the main point of the story; where Icarus had flown too close to the sun and died.

"Let's put it into a perspective you may understand," Techno says after a moment, tone serene and arms crossed over his chest calmly, "The heroes of this city. You know them, right?"

"How could I not?" Tommy mutters tersely, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He's beginning to really hope that Techno isn't a fucking- hero stan or whatever they're called. This may not end well.

"Alright, uh... let's take Hypnos, then, for example," Techno continues, and Tommy bites down on his tongue. "Let's say, hypothetically, that Hypnos was granted wings by some unknown force."

"Impossible," Tommy chimes in, and Techno rolls his eyes.

"I said metaphorically for a reason, Tommy," Techno clears his throat, then resumes, "So picture that Hypnos now has wings. Because he's a hero - and he's *Hypnos*, you've seen him on TV - that already makes him... you know. Up there."

(Tommy resists the urge to snort—he knew all too well the type of person Hypnos was).

"Egotistical, big man, you're thinking of the word 'egotistical,'" Tommy provides, spine straightening a little when Techno just nods. Maybe the guy isn't some hero worshipper like most others in this fucking city.

That would be nice. There aren't very many of those nowadays.

“Right, so you can imagine, Hypnos, the second ranked hero of Manberg, with wings. What exactly do you expect he’d be doing with them?” Techno hums, now watching Tommy, eyes scanning his face as though searching for something. “Do you believe that he wouldn’t show them off right away?”

Tommy shifts uncomfortably under the man’s gaze, but holds his ground, turning his head a little.

What *would* Hypnos do?

It was a good question— although Hypnos was probably one of the most arrogant heroes in the Complex, he also happened to be incredibly smart. Not too qualities that went well together, in his opinion.

The hero wasn’t the type to gloat about things he has, or pretend like he’s better than everyone else. He did that sometimes, but he always made sure it was well timed, unlike some of the other heroes in the Complex.

(Tommy hates the gross feeling that begins to curl in the pit of his stomach at the thought of Techno having asked about Morpheus instead. He hates that he knows his answer would’ve been quickly timed).

“I think he’d tuck them away,” Tommy whispers truthfully, not meeting Techno’s gaze, feeling significantly colder even as the sun blazes in through the window. “He doesn’t seem the type to flaunt his worth. His fr— *teammates* do that enough for him.”

Techno hums, his tone bordering on surprise, “I never took you for a Hypnos fan.”

“I’m not a fan,” Tommy snarls, rounding on the man, before blinking and steadying himself, shoulders unwinding, “I’m not— I don’t like the heroes, alright? And I don’t like villains, either, so don’t start asking me about that shit. I just— I’ve seen Hypnos fight on the television. He’s good, and he’s not— really, he seems like he sleeps too much to really care about what goes on in reality.”

(Above everything else, that was one quality that Tommy had always envied about the hero. His ability to sleep without much effort. Sometimes the guilt on his shoulders worsens with how much he misses being there, until he quickly reminds himself that it was his better to be out of there in the first place... right?)

Tommy's rambling at this point, and he knows he is, but it's a difficult thing to stop. Once he starts thinking in every direction about things like this, there's never the opportunity to see the end of the train track. It's never ending.

"I get it," Techno interjects, and Tommy clicks his jaw shut, thankful for an opportunity to just *stop*.

It's quiet for a moment, and then Techno continues, "It's just a bit rare to see civilians who don't pick a side."

Tommy gives him a bit of a wry smile, "Guess I'm a first, then."

The corner of Techno's mouth twitches, "You're definitely a first."

---

*There's a blue butterfly.*

*He's never seen one before.*

*Tommy holds his finger out and smiles when it lands on the tip, moving its wings around.*

*"Hello, little one," he whispers to it, his smile only growing when it begins to crawl up his finger, "Aren't you lovely?"*

*The butterfly pauses and he laughs gently, keepi his voice down.*

*“You’re my new friend, alright?” he tells the butterfly quietly so no one else can hear him.*

*The creature examines him a bit, fluttering its wings as if saying “yes”, before taking off into the sky.*

*Tommy can’t help but smile more despite the departure of a new friend.*

*He watches it disappear into a cloudy sky, slowly becoming nothing more than a flying blue speck.*

*Maybe, if he’s lucky, it’ll come back some day.*

*(He’s knows that he’s not, but he still hopes that maybe that will change).*

---

Tommy is tackled pretty much the moment he walks through the front door of the Craft household, being engulfed in a massive hug from an incredibly tall dumbass named Wilbur.

He probably should’ve expected this one and properly prepared for it.

Techno quickly walks past the two, easing away from the octopus called *Wilbur* with experience. Tommy secretly salutes the guy. He knows what he’s doing, clearly. Years of experience n’ shit.



“Get *off* of me, man,” Tommy complains, shoving against the man hugging him and making a face as he’s only tugged further into a warm chest. “Jesus, you’re so fucking *clingy*, Wil. You need to get help. I literally just saw you the other day, idiot.”

“Is it so wrong for me to want a hug from my little brother when I’ve missed him?” Wilbur lilts, smirking down at the boy. Tommy shoots him a sharp glare. Fucking prick.

“One, I’m not little,” the boy begins to threaten, still trying to shove the man away. “And two, I’ll just step on your foot again.”

“Ooh, I’m so scared.” Wilbur mocks despite letting go of Tommy and taking a couple steps back.

“Don’t test me. I will do it, and you’ll be very upset and go, ‘*oooh, ooh, Tomm-ay, Tomm-ay, why would you do that, Tomm-ay?*’ and I’ll go, ‘*Haha, Wilbur’s foot hurts— Wilbur Foot—*’”

“I don’t sound like that.” Wilbur interjects with a frown, crossing his arms when Tommy puts on a mocking tone of his voice again.

“*I don’t sound like that,*” Tommy mocks, lilting his voice and crossing his arms. “Yes, yes you do, mate. You sound all pretentious n’ shit, like you’ve got a hundred quid and you’re about to rub it in my face. Fucking tory.”

“What? What the fuck’s wrong with you?” Wilbur whispers, swiveling his head around in the direction Techno had slipped away. “Techno, king, what did you do to Tommy? Why’s he being a bitch?”

Tommy raises his finger to interject, “He hasn’t done anything, I’m in perfect condition, actually. And I’m not a bitch, that’s actually *your* title.”

Wilbur narrows his eyes, facing Tommy again. He is suddenly looking as though he’s just solved a mystery. “...Did he give you sugar?”

Tommy pales.

Wilbur's a better detective than he'd originally thought.

"No." Tommy tries.

Wilbur's eyes narrow further.

Shit.

"He gave you sugar, didn't he?"

Well, he's caught.

Cat's out of the bag now. He can't lie to Wilbur.

(That's what he tells himself, at least).

"It was just one doughnut, Wil—" Tommy begins.

"I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna *fucking* kill him," Wilbur swears, clenching his jaw in a way that makes Tommy wince a little. "I'm gonna— oooh, I'm gonna fucking *annihilate* him."

"I don't think you'd win that one, Wil." Tommy points out, pursing his lips to conceal a laugh.

“Oh, I totally would. He’s going down. Him and his dumb collection of books.”

Tommy gives him a weary smile. Wilbur can be a bit scary like this, he’s decided.

“Okay, definitely. Keep your head up, king. Positivity n’ shit.” Tommy gives him a thumbs-up.

Wilbur exhales, dragging a hand down his face and then holding it out to Tommy, tension fading from his stance a little when the boy takes it, “Whatever, just— come on, gremlin. Phil’s made dinner. You better hope that you didn’t spoil it with a stupid doughnut.”

Tommy perks up a tad at that. Phil always made good food.

“What’s he made this time?”

“Chicken and rice.”

Oh.

Gross.

“What the hell is a chicken and rice? Has he just put like- fucking rice in the stomach of a chicken or something? That’s kinda fucked up.”

Wilbur turns from where he’s started to walk down the hall to give Tommy a look of pure disgust, “Do you— what? Do you even know how to cook, bro?”

Tommy lets out a snort, grinning the way he does when he’s found something to make into a bit.

He swings his and Wilbur's intertwined hands between them, putting on another mocking tone, deepening his voice, "Do you even *cook*, bro?"

Wilbur grins, "Yeah, *bro*, do you even cook?"

"We should interrogate Phil and ask him if he even knows how to cook or if he's just faking it to fit the fatherly stereotype," Tommy says with a cheeky grin, "Let's— ooh, let's ask him if he would ever cook for his nonexistent wife."

Wilbur lets out a bark of a laugh, ruffling Tommy's hair with his free hand, "Yeah, let's go bug Phil about his inability to cook and his nonexistent wife."

"Hell yeah. Let's kick him while he's still *down*, Wil." Tommy says sinisterly, dropping his tone to make it gravelly and feeling a curl of pride when the man lets out a string of laughter.

"I'm all for it," Wilbur agrees, still smiling down at Tommy.

"We can- we can enact a little *crime* on him, too, maybe," Tommy tacks on as he and Wilbur continue walking down the hallway, now animatedly waving his free hand around as he speaks, "We can be the little *crime boys*, Wilbur."

"Oh yeah? We're the crime boys, huh?"

"Yes, yes, indeed we are. Chuck us in a town and smear us with some mud and we will be the *dirty* crime boys. It only gets better when there's mud involved."

"You're so ridiculous," Wilbur admits, shaking his head fondly. "You're never having sugar again."

“What the hell? That’s so unfair, you’re not my dad, you can’t just tell me what to do, prick!”

“I am your father now,” Wilbur jokes, snickering when Tommy glowers at him. He lowers his voice a few tones, hands going to his hips like a disappointed parent, “No more sugar for you, son.”

“Oh fuck off with your- your ridiculously receding hairline and your dumb emo trench coat,” Tommy grumbles angrily, smacking the guy in the arm as he snickers. “I’ll just, yknow, borrow the sugar if I have to from stores or something. You cannot stop me.”

“No, Tommy, that’s called *stealing*, something you aren’t supposed to be doing.” Wilbur says with an eye roll, rubbing his arm where the kid had smacked it.

Tommy grins, “*Crime boys*, Wil, remember? It’s my duty. I must—”

“What’s your duty?” Phil chimes in, poking his head around the corner of the kitchen, smiling warmly when he sees Tommy. “Hi, Tommy. It’s good to have you back.”

Tommy flushes, “Hi, Mr.— Phil. Just Phil. Hi.”

Phil snorts, “Hi, Tommy.”

“Hi, Phil. How’s the nonexistent wife?” Wilbur pipes up, and Phil’s head snaps in his direction, but his eyes just spark with something bordering on amusement.

“You— I have a wife, you know,” Phil exhales, looking tired.

“Oh, wait, really?” Tommy blinks. This is news to him.

“Yes, Tommy. I have a wife. Don’t listen to anything that Wil tells you, it’s all bullshit.”

“There’s a Mrs. Phil?” Tommy turns accusingly to Wilbur, who’s pursing his lips to keep from laughing, “What the hell, Wilbur? I thought we were *partners in crime*, bro. How dare you not tell me that you have a real and actual mother?”

“I— Tommy, obviously I have a mother,” Wilbur responds, patting the boy’s shoulder consolingly, “Everyone does.”

Tommy bites his tongue for the third time that day. He doesn’t, but really, he doesn’t necessarily need one. Mothers are for losers. Like Wilbur and apparently Techno.

“Yeah, whatever,” Tommy walks away from Wilbur, releasing their hands and slumping down at the kitchen table, “So, Phil, as we dine on rice that’s been inserted horrendously into chicken, why don’t you tell me more about this mysterious wife you’ve got?”

“Well, she’s the best thing that ever happened to me.” Phil says, deciding to skim right over the whole ‘rice being inserted into chicken’ part. From the doorway, Tommy can hear Wilbur let out an *aww*.

“Yeah, okay, but where is she?” Tommy glances around the room, half expecting some woman to pop out of nowhere and go “*Surprise! I’m the very much real Mrs. Phil!*” or something.

Last he remembers from his previous (and only) visit, he hadn’t seen any wives or even women. How disappointing, really.

“She, uh...” Phil glances at Wilbur, who has left the room to probably retrieve Techno for dinner or something.

Phil coughs a little, “She’s, uh, she’s not around, mate.”

Oh.

Tommy recoils immediately, kicking himself internally for even bringing it up.

He probably shouldn't have asked too many questions.

The answer was pretty plain as day with how dull the house is and the absence of said wife. He probably should've guessed. Should've picked up on the signs.

He bites his lip, tasting slight metallic.

"Oh," Tommy says out loud, voice very quiet, "Oh- I'm, uh, I'm sorry. I didn't know... I'm real sorry for bringing it up."

"Wait- no, Tommy, she's not *dead*, mate," Phil reassures quickly, turning around with eyes wide and hands held up, "She's just not around right now."

Tommy deflates immediately, exhaling like someone had just taken a load of bricks from his shoulders, "Oh, fucking— holy shit, Phil, you've got to just say that, idiot. Fucking hell, man, I thought..."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Phil says with a big grin, turning to put an oven mitt on and open the door to it, "She's just not around, I didn't mean to imply that she was, you know."

Tommy nods solemnly.

"On a slightly better note, though, dinner's officially ready."

“Pog,” Tommy announces in relief, tapping his feet on the ground as Phil pulls out a glass pan and sets it atop the stove. It’s full of like... yellowish liquid.

It looks like piss.

Is Phil feeding him piss?

Tommy decides it’s better not to ask for the sake of Phil’s confidence. He’d hate to bring the man down a notch on the ego scale.

Wilbur slumps into a seat on Tommy’s right moments later, quickly followed by Techno, who sits on Tommy’s left.

“Phil,” Wilbur says, tone lilting as Phil rummages through a drawer in the kitchen, “I was just talking to Techno and we have both realized that your birthday’s coming up, isn’t it?”

Tommy looks up immediately, eyebrows raised.

He had forgotten that the concept of ‘birthdays’ was actually a thing.

He hadn’t had a normal birthday in years.

(Truthfully, he doesn’t really care much for the holiday, if it could even be called that. At least, he told himself that he doesn’t care much).

“Yep,” Phil says without glancing back, the clattering of metal as he looks through the silverware. “Just another month and I’ll be the ripe age of thirty-six.”

“Oh really?” Tommy hums a little, mind moving a bit. “Mine’s in a month, too.”



“No shit?” Wilbur says, turning in his chair to smile at the boy.

“Yep!” Tommy pops the ‘p’, smiling a tad.

He really isn’t much for birthdays, but Wilbur looks so excited that he might as well, too.

“That’s sick, man! We can have a double birthday for you both. We can have- we can have *double* the champagne, too.”

Phil snorts, turning with a plate full of food and setting it down in front of Tommy. It smells amazing despite looking like weird, almost solid piss.

“We are not bringing fucking *champagne* to Tommy and I’s double birthday party,” Phil scolds, turning to plate some more food.

“Oh, but why not? You want champagne, don’t you, Tommy?” Wilbur turns to Tommy expectantly, grinning.

Tommy shrugs, continuing to frown at the mound of shit on his plate, still deciding whether or not he should sacrifice a night of being sick for the sake of Phil’s happiness.

“I don’t drink.” Tommy admits absentmindedly, and it’s true. He’s had a sip of alcohol before but it was rancid, in his opinion.

He pokes at the food on his plate with a fork.

It falls apart a little.

Is this shit even edible?

“Why’s that?” Wilbur continues, but it’s mostly just background noise at this point, almost like someone’s left a YouTube video on in the background.

Tommy doesn’t even realize he’s responding when he does, still examining the chicken and rice on his plate.

“Well, for starters, I’m not even sixteen yet,” Tommy responds, more as a second nature type thing, still trying to figure out if he should eat this food on his plate or not. “And second of all, that shit is nasty. I don’t trust you if you drink it willingly. Probably a wrong’un.”

Really, it’s beginning to feel like there are two opposite ends of his brain screaming at him to try the food in front of him or to not. It’s starting to become a migraine at this point and he forgot to bring his meds today, somehow.

Tommy isn’t truly aware of how quiet it’s gotten in the room until Wilbur says, “You’re fifteen?”

He freezes.

Oh, fuck.

He slowly looks over at Wilbur, eyes wide. The man is staring at him in pure and utter horror, expression appearing as though someone had just kicked his dog or something.

He can hear the clatter of metal against tile flooring as Phil drops something.

Oh, fuck.

He's in deep shit now, isn't he?

"Haha, I mean," Tommy begins to backpedal, holding his hands up. He feels like he's about to get into a scuffle with someone even though that's probably the opposite of what's going on here. "I mean, uh— I definitely want some champagne at my *nineteenth* birthday party, yes, Phil, yes, anything for you—"

"You're fifteen?" Phil speaks up now, echoing Wilbur's horror, and Tommy winces, turning in the man's direction. He's so fucked, isn't he?

"Uh," Tommy blinks, then smiles weakly. The cat's out of the bag yet again, but for real this time. No getting out of this one. Slowly, he raises his hands upwards, palms out like he's showing everyone something cool. "Surprise...?"

Everything's silent again.

Even Techno is staring at him.

Lord, he's really fucked up this time.

Tommy's stomach churns with anxiety and he almost feels like he wants to get up from the table and dash out the front door. So what if it was freezing outside? He'd make it.

He has before.

"You're..." Phil whispers, and he looks like he's aged another fifty years. Tommy worries for his sanity. "Oh... oh my stars, you're actually *fifteen*?"

"Oh, fuck, Wil," Tommy turns anxiously to the man on his right, hoping to maneuver this situation into a direction that isn't so serious. He's basically pulled himself into Plan B when

things go to shit: turn everything into a bit. “Wil, I think I’ve turned Phil senile, he’s beginning to forget shit now.”

Wilbur blinks a little, almost like he’s coming out of a daze.

Tommy’s almost worried he’s lost him too until he whispers, “You’re... Tommy, you’re *tiny*.”

What the fuck.

This is actually the exact opposite direction that Tommy wanted this to go in. Where’s the control z of reality?

“I’m— what the hell, man, I’m not fucking tiny, I’m literally *six foot three*—” Tommy begins, really wishing that Wilbur had just gone along with his ‘Phil is incredibly old’ bit instead of this incredibly shit one.

“No, you’re, like, five foot ten at *most*— and— Primes, now that you’ve said your age, I can totally see it. You’re so fucking tiny, you’re actually just a *child*,” Wilbur teases, a smile flickering onto his face even though it’s a bit strained, hands reaching out to poke both of Tommy’s cheeks, “You’re *minuscule*, Toms. A little baby man—”

Tommy slaps his hands away angrily. He turns with a grossed out face to Techno, who is currently his last and only hope.

“Techno,” he complains loudly, trying to keep his tone from bordering on a whine, “Techno, big man, Hercules enthusiast, please *help me*.”

“You’ve got yourself into this one, Tommy.” Techno just says, looking at the boy with the same deadpan expression, raising an eyebrow.

Tommy isn't sure if it's more or less concerning that Techno looks just bored with this situation instead of flabbergasted like the other three.

"Fucking— *Philll*," Tommy drags a hand down his face, turning back to the big man of the house again, hoping the guy's not still thunderstruck, "Please stop being old for a second and tell your dumb son that he's bullying me."

"I'm just—" Wilbur begins.

"You're *bullying* me," Tommy interjects, poking the man in the shoulder. He hopes distantly that nobody can see the way his hands have begun to violently shake. "This isn't a bit anymore, it's plain bullying and I hate you for it."

"Tommy," Phil says suddenly, his tone still reflecting pure horror, "Tommy, you... you've been working half-time at two jobs for the past *five months*, and apparently walking home alone. How- how the fuck are you still standing, mate?"

Ah.

He'd almost forgotten that Phil was his literal boss. That just makes everything so much better.

Whoever chose Tommy's amount of luck, he's decided that he fucking hates them.

Tommy blinks, slowly beginning to explain, hope twinging into his tone that he doesn't lose his job, "Phil, I can take care of myself. I may be fifteen but that doesn't change anything, you know, I can still do my job n' shit. I'm not the *best* worker, but I do think that I work decently hard—"

"I know that, Tommy, but just— you shouldn't *have* to," Phil whispers, looking at him the way that fuckin' *Sam* does sometimes. Tommy isn't sure if he feels weirdly pitied or... comforted by this occurrence.

He decides to shove whatever feelings that come with it down a drain.

“I have to pay my bills somehow, you know,” Tommy mumbles. “Plus, I like my jobs. They’re... nice.”

*You’re both nicer than anyone else ever was, after all,* Tommy wants to say, but keeps his mouth closed.

“I— but what about your parents? Don’t they have jobs?”

“They’re... uh, you know,” Tommy waves his hands around, slumping down in his chair.

If he’s coming clean, he might as well just come clean about a few more things, right?

Phil just blinks, “What?”

Tommy swallows thickly, “They’re, you know... on a business trip.”

“On a business trip,” Wilbur repeats slowly. He doesn’t sound too happy.

“Yep,” Tommy says, laughing nervously, tapping his fingers on the table, “You know parents... they like to travel and shit.”

“And they just left you all by yourself in that dingy old apartment with just a sofa?” Phil says, eyebrows furrowed suspiciously.

Tommy shrinks a little in his chair.

“It’s not that dingy,” he defends.

Phil deadpans him and Tommy sinks a little more into the chair.

Phil’s a scary man.

“It’s not a big deal, really,” Tommy reassures once he’s found his voice again, “They’re just busy, you know how it is, right? Your wife is gone too, not dead, just... gone, or whatever. It’s just how things are.”

“Yes, Tommy, but... they’re practically *neglecting* you at this point, mate. Surely you know that...?” Phil murmurs.

*If only that were actually the case*, Tommy thinks bitterly. He might rather have neglectful parents than the current situation; a bounty on his head and supposedly dead.

Maybe in that situation he could actually be normal for once and not a “most wanted” witness or something.

“They’ve only been gone for like... three months,” Tommy lies easily, even as something claws at him to just come clean with everything. He knows he can’t, though.

(It would ruin all that he’s been trying to build for the past five months).

“Seriously, Phil, it’s not a big fuckin’ deal, alright? I’m fine. I can take care of myself. Don’t start getting gray hairs because of me. You’ve got enough to worry about.”

Wilbur hums disapprovingly at this, but Phil shoots him a look.

“We... we’re gonna have to talk more on this later, okay?” Phil tells Tommy, exhaling and rubbing a tension out from between his eyes.

Uh oh.

Tommy always knows what direction that inevitably leads in.

He clenches his jaw, averting his eyes, trying to distract himself from anything but the memory trying to resurface.

*Focus on something else*, he reminds himself.

“You’re not gonna fire me, are you?” Tommy whispers weakly.

“No, what? Of *course* not,” Phil says immediately, giving the boy a terse but reassuring smile, “I may cut down your hours a little, but I’m not going to fire you or anything. You are my hardest working employee, after all.”

Tommy smiles a little in return, “Thanks, Phil, but uhm... I really need as many hours as I can get. Money’s important.”

Phil smiles again, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“We’ll talk about it, Tommy.”

---



Tommy's nearly asleep when he gets the text message.

It dings loudly in his pocket, making him wake up much too quickly. He barely even remembers falling asleep in the first place, honestly.

Slowly, Tommy sits up from his position on the couch, where he'd had his face smushed into Wilbur's shoulder and yawns, glancing around him.

To his right, Wilbur's fast asleep, head leaning back against the sofa, drooping a little in Tommy's direction. He looks peaceful, much too peaceful, really.

Across the room, leaning back in his arm chair, is none other than Phil, his iconic hat placed over his face.

Tommy almost has to stifle a laugh at how much like a stereotypical dad Phil looks like right now, his feet propped up on the little lift part of the arm chair, hands folded in front of him, hat concealing his dumb dad snores.

Other than that, Techno was nowhere in sight, having decided to leave when Wilbur turned on another random Disney movie (something about strange animals from before time or whatever. It was boring enough to make Tommy fall asleep, anyways).

Blairily, he looks down at his phone, unlocking it and rubbing at his eyes sleepily as he examines the message he's gotten.

**Quackity:** i'm coming to get u tomorrow at 5 pm

**Quackity:** be ready :]

Tommy tenses, no longer feeling tired as he glances worriedly in Wilbur's direction again.

The man's still completely knocked out and Tommy isn't sure if he feels comforted or uneasy by this fact. It's almost like being the first one awake at a sleepover with nothing to do. It's an eerie, uncomfortable feeling, but still strangely nice because there's actually someone *there*, beside him, even if they are asleep.

It's another one of those incredibly conflicting feelings that makes Tommy's head swivel (not to mention the little part right between Wilbur's shoulder and the way he's leant his head down a little that is a perfect fit for Tommy to just lean back in again and fall asleep. Almost like a missing piece of a puzzle).

Despite the way his chest is practically screaming at him to just fall right back asleep beside Wil, where he feels *safe*, he ignores it.

(He doubts he'll be able to fall back asleep now, anyways).

Shutting his phone off, Tommy carefully rises off the couch, doing his best not to jostle or wake either sleeping men.

He carefully steps over Wilbur's way too long legs, drawing in unsteady breaths and hating the way that his hands have begun to shake. He leans against the doorway leading from the living room to the staircase and breathes for a moment, trying to get a grip on himself.

Quackity was going to be picking him up to prepare for the supposed "peace banquet" *tomorrow*.

How didn't he know? How was it that he was still so incredibly oblivious to the days that passed by? It wasn't as though he didn't know one day from the other— he had a perfectly working mobile calendar.

He just... didn't use it.

Exhaling shakily again, Tommy grits his teeth and begins to make his way up the stairs, knuckles turning white with the grip he has on the stairwell.

(Distantly, he can hear the ambient sounds of the Disney movie Wilbur had turned on, but they're nothing but background static now).

Tommy reaches the top landing and he isn't even sure where he's going until he's there, standing in the center of the very large library, the smell of old books and sea salt almost overwhelming.

It's the most comforting place in the house and somehow he knew exactly where it was despite only being here once beforehand.

(Right?)

"Did you get bored of the movie, too?" Techno drawls and Tommy jumps, swiveling around to glare at the man accusingly.

The guy is sitting cross-legged in one of the arm chairs in the library, a lap clicked on as he reads from an obnoxiously large book, eyes watching Tommy from over his rectangular glasses.

His hair is pulled back in an elaborate braid that makes Tommy even more jealous and - despite being in fucking pajamas - the man is still covered from head to toe in gold.

Pretentious prick.

"What the hell?" Tommy hisses out, one hand against his chest and the other pointing angrily at Techno, "You can't just scare a man like that, dickhead!"

Techno smirks a little, "Sorry."

“You’re not, though.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not, I can see it on your face,” Tommy snaps.

“Fine, child, but it’s your choice to not to accept my apology,” Techno hums, leaning back into the soft armchair and resuming the book he had been reading.

“Oh, fuck off with that *child* shit,” Tommy grumbles, walking over and slumping down in the chair beside the man, bringing his knees to his chest. “Fifteen isn’t even that young, you guys are just being dumb.”

“If you say so,” Techno responds calmly, eyeing Tommy over his glasses for a moment. If he notices how tense the boy is, he doesn’t bring it up.

(Silently, Tommy thanks him for it).

It’s quiet for a while in the little library, the sounds of turning pages and the drumming of Tommy’s fingers on the little coffee table separating the two armchairs being the only thing that fills the room.

Tommy thinks it’s almost... nice, really. It would be if he wasn’t so on edge and the feeling of bile wasn’t trekking it’s way up his throat slowly.

“Can you tell me the story again?” Tommy whispers suddenly, breaking the silence.

Techno looks up at him expectantly.

“What story?”

“The one about Icarus.”

“Why?”

Tommy lowers his gaze, picking at a thread on his cardigan, his voice almost a whisper, “I want to hear your perspective. It’s... interesting.”

Techno hums and closes the book in his hands, setting it carefully on the table, “Sure.”

There’s another moment of silence, and Tommy coughs a little, “And, uh... could you help me with one another thing?”

“It depends on what it is.”

“Your hair,” Tommy begins, and Techno tilts his head.

“What about it?”

“How, uh... how do you braid it like that?”

Techno frowns, “What... French braiding, you mean?”

“Yeah- fucking- the cool thing. Whatever it is you’ve got going on,” Tommy motions with his hands to the man’s hair.

Techno blinks, slowly, as if thinking something over, and then says, “Do you, uh... do you want me to show you how?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble—”

“It’s not,” Techno reassures, then averts his eyes, looking at the foot stool sitting in front of his arm chair, “Uh... if you come sit in front of me, I’ll do it for you...?”

Tommy stares at him.

“Wait... really?” Tommy whispers, staring at the man incredulously.

“Yeah, sure. Wilbur braids it for me all the time and I sometimes practice on him, too,” Techno mumbles, “It’s become a bit of a family trait. Even Phil’s got a braided strand sometimes.”

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude on a family thing, then—” Tommy begins, scooting a bit away in his chair.

“You’re not,” Techno reassures immediately, a ghost of a smile on his face, “Even so, you do realize that you’re technically a part of this family now, right?”

“Not *really*,” Tommy begins, fumbling with his hand a little, “I mean— I’m just a kid that works at your dad’s job who somehow befriended your brother, aren’t I?”

“You’re *our* friend, Tommy,” Techno insists, leaning forward in the arm chair, head tilted and the familiar emerald earring swinging by his cheek, “You’re not just the kid from Eldritch Wings. You’re our friend, and— hell, to quote Wilbur, even though he’s a possessive bastard — you’re our little brother. If you’d like to be, of course. We’re not forcing this whatsoever, especially since you’ve already got a family.”

Tommy swallows a growing lump in his throat, steadying himself away from whispering *You're all I've got in terms of family, really*. Instead, he simply chokes out, "... Seriously?"

Techno quirks a little bit of a smile, "Seriously, kid. Now come over here so I can tell you about Icarus while I braid your hair. Or, uh, at least try to teach you, if you're willin' to learn."

Tommy smiles a little despite himself, choking down the tears that threaten to overspill.

He won't cry. He *doesn't* cry.

Not tonight, anyways.

If he can, he will make it his last best night alive before the slaughter standing around the corner.

The crying can come another time.

Right now, he can just let himself be *here*.

(Whatever 'here' entails, he decides he'll choose another time).

"Okay," he whispers, sitting down on the foot rest in front of Techno's arm chair, "Tell me about some Greek heroes, Mr. Hercules."

"They're not exactly heroes, Tommy, but I will try to anyways."

## Chapter End Notes

have i mentioned how dumb butterflies!tommy is? no? well. mans is stupid /lh but i love him for it

anwyays, i wrote this purely because we got 4/4 content at the end of mcc today, but i'm still sick so take my dumb poorly written fluff & crack & go <3

(btw, this is the last fluff chapter for a bit unless i act dumb & write more so consume it while u can /hj <3)

i would like to reiterate again that i wrote this fic mostly for shits & giggles so if plot points don't make sense & stuff, i sincerely apologize, i have no like. written out plan before chapters, i just go w/ the flow and write mostly crack :) i apologize for any inconveniences with this shsjdjjdjf , and i'm genuinely so grateful to everyone who likes my silly little fic . you're all so sweet :(( /pos & i hope you're all well !!



# seems like i care too much

## Chapter Summary

(title from ykwim by yot club)

Wilbur's interlude & a questioning of a symphony that was never meant to be.

## Chapter Notes

tws: derealization, mentions of drowning/implied near character death, talk of self deprecating thoughts & anxiety, mild platonic possessive behaviour

please do NOT take anything in this fic as /romantic! it is all platonic, thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur has always had a strange relationship with the ocean.

When he was younger, he loved it— loved the smell of sea salt and hints of banana ice cream that would drift from the boardwalk. He loved the taste of something bittersweet dripping from your tongue if you were underwater for too long. He loved collecting seashells and running up to his father with them clutched between his hands, ignoring the way the shape dug into his palms.

He loved *everything* about it, and his father did, too.

Those truly were simpler times.

Visiting the beach every other Saturday, just him, Phil, and Techno. He'd usually be the first one in the ocean, swimming out as far as he could (until Phil would start calling him back in, worry etched into his tone). Techno was always the one who didn't like going in the water, claiming that it "smelled bad," or whatever.

Wilbur always tried to force his brother into the water, running up to him and trying to tackle him into the waves, or picking up a stick covered in seaweed that would float past and poke him in the side with it, as if trying to provoke him.

Whenever he did this, it always ended up turning into strange sword fighting lessons, where Techno would try and teach Wilbur everything he learned in his sword lessons, all the while Wilbur would just turn up his nose and beg his twin to just "swim with him normally".

Wilbur didn't start feeling the strange hatred for the sea until his and Techno's fifteenth birthday.

They decided to have the party on the beach (despite Techno's efforts to say that they should just have it in the house as they usually did, even though Wil argued that was incredibly boring).

As per usual, Wilbur was the first one in the water, dragging a few of the friends that he'd invited with him and trying to coax Techno and the person he'd invited into the sea.

(Really, it was weird enough that Techno had actually invited someone to their shared birthday party; usually Wil's twin was more interested in books or just "sharing" friends with Wilbur or something, but he had actually *brought* someone this time. Not to mention, it was this extremely extroverted kid Wilbur knew from school, someone he never would've expected *Techno* of all people to be friends with).

Even though Wilbur had begged and pleaded, Techno had still said no, refusing to get in the water, even when Wil pulled the trump card that it could be a special birthday present or something.

Accepting defeat, Wilbur had gone swimming alone, deciding that he was old enough to go all the way out to sea past the little cones that floated just at the edge of the water.

He ignored the calls of his father, ignored the concerned yells of caution from his friends.

In the end, Wilbur had nearly drowned when he received an unexpected leg cramp and was taken by the underwater bends.

Ever since that day, Wilbur can never forget the way the water he had loved so dearly had filled his lungs, the way the salt began to feel like paper cuts against his arms and skin, the way the sun slowly began to fade from his vision as he sunk even further below the waves.

The phenomenon has stuck with Wilbur for years, a constant recurrence in his songs and in his mind, the choked feeling of sea salt scratching away at his throat and entering his eyes nothing but a burning, distant memory.

Whenever his thoughts grew worse, like a dark swarming cloud, they would drag him down with them, and he'd be stuck at the bottom of the ocean again, with nobody to save him.

Wilbur would be stuck forever in his own mind, lungs full of sea water and the feeling of a weight on his chest that he could never pull off.

It's with this memory that Wilbur can only imagine a possible *sliver* of how Tommy feels.

A fifteen year old working two part time jobs, eyebags clinging to him like permanent tattoos, a phantom pain that nobody could name weighing his shoulders down, forcing him to walk with an incredibly skewed posture.

Tommy was hiding something.

That much was apparent from the day Techno had come home, eyes dark as he claimed that the boy had most likely been ‘trained’ by someone to act the way that he does.

Every part of Wilbur wanted to just grab the boy by the shoulders and coax whatever it was out of him, to beg Tommy to tell him, to tell Techno, to tell whomever about everything, to pull his little brother out of the endless, unforgiving sea.

Wilbur knows that he can’t, though.

That he will never be enough, that his arms reaching out to drag Tommy from whatever intangible, metaphorical force has him drowning in his own thoughts, in his own apathy—none of it will be enough.

Wilbur will never be able to truly know what Tommy’s going through. Nobody can understand what another person is feeling unless they *are* them.

He hopes though that maybe, *hopefully*, a day will come where Tommy will look at him and see something more than just the weird “emo guy” that visits the bookstore every other day. Maybe one day he will see a friend, a brother, or simply just someone who would hang the very stars in the sky for him.

(Who would destroy the entirety of this polluted, corrupted city for him).

Wilbur wonders what Tommy’s personal “sea” could be; he has since the day he met him.

(He feels, too, that he grows closer to the answer, but he isn’t so sure that he wants it anymore).

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter proves i cant write angst lmao

the irony of the verse from the song that inspired me to write this chapter being “i’m feeling safer/than i knew i could be/with your arms dragging me/into the sea”.

(song is “kmd” by american poetry club but i was listening to wilbur’s cover of it while writing this lmao<3)

haha, anyways! happy november 16th, smile.

# **“make a wish,” — part I**

## Chapter Summary

(chap title from black & blue birds by dave matthews band. wink wink)

The usually long, agonizing walk feels like it takes only a couple seconds, and in a blink of an eye they are standing right in front of Tommy’s apartment door.

The boy digs his fingernails into his palm, biting hard on his cheek. They were here and he...

He didn’t want to leave.

He didn’t want to part from Wilbur’s side, where he was warmly tucked inside of the man’s incredibly nice trench coat. He hadn’t wanted to leave Phil’s house earlier that morning, either, with the smell of old books and freshly baked food lingering every corner he turned.

or, everyone prepares for the ball, & tommy begins to have a crisis.

## Chapter Notes

please read trigger warnings for this & the next upcoming chapter. thank you <3

tw: suicidal thoughts / ideation (!!!) , derealization, self deprecating thoughts, mentioned past character death / implied future character death, panic attack, mirrors, heavily manipulative character, & platonic possessive behavior!

bit of a heavy chapter, be safe readers <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It’s cold outside.

A terrible feat, even if you’ve endlessly wrapped yourself in two layers of your favourite jumpers and an undershirt.

Tommy hates the cold, and he grimaces the moment he sets foot out of Techno's car, arms curling around himself, facing his apartment complex like it's an old foe.

From the outside in the daytime, he can understand why Phil had used the word "dingy". It really does look pretty beaten down if you compare it to a mansion like the Craft family lives in.

Really, though, it wasn't all *that* bad.

Sure it had its downsides, but at least Tommy wasn't living on the street or something.

A car door slams shut and he flinches, turning his head to watch Wilbur climb out the driver's side and stand beside him, giving him a semi-reassuring smile. He looks just as tense as Tommy feels, really.

"Ready?" the man asks, holding out a gloved hand that makes Tommy snort. Wilbur's wearing woolen, fingerless gloves made of white fur. Tommy's never understood the need for these types of gloves; why not just wear regular ones?

(Ironically, back when he was Theseus, he wore fingerless gloves, too. They just weren't *furry*.)

"Ready," Tommy breathes, giving the man a sullen smile before taking his hand, basking in the warmth he immediately feels.

How can one person be so incredibly warm to the touch?

Tommy couldn't understand it.

Usually everyone he touches is so *cold* (or maybe he just is).

But Techno wasn't, strangely enough, and neither was Wilbur or really Phil.

He begins to inch a little closer to Wilbur, seeking the warmth as they walk towards his apartment, until the man huffs fondly and just wraps an arm around the boy's shoulders.

"You're freezing, Tommy," he murmurs, shaking his head when Tommy glares at him.

The two traverse up the old, iron stairs to the second floor — *Tommy's* floor — all whilst Wilbur hums low underneath his breath, securing Tommy underneath the side of his vampire like trench coat.

The usually long, agonizing walk feels like it takes only a couple seconds, and in a blink of an eye they are standing right in front of Tommy's apartment door.

The boy digs his fingernails into his palm, biting hard on his cheek. They were here and he...

He didn't want to leave.

He didn't want to part from Wilbur's side, where he was warmly tucked inside of the man's incredibly nice trench coat. He hadn't wanted to leave Phil's house earlier that morning, either, with the smell of old books and freshly baked food lingering every corner he turned.

He didn't want to stray from Techno's large but careful hands that had spent hours weaving French braids through Tommy's hair, or the rumbling sound of the man's voice as he retold Greek myth after Greek myth (all in the hopes that the trembling child in front of him would calm down).

He didn't want to say goodbye to all of Phil's warm smiles and hugs, or the way the man always seemed happy to see him, no matter what. Not to mention the food that he made; the



crepes, the piss and rice or whatever it was, *all of it*.

He wanted to stay.

Not just for a day, but for as long as he could, and he wanted to be *loved*, but he wasn't even sure if they did love him.

(Even if he was sure, it was a feat that wasn't meant to be, and he would be gone soon in a "freak accident" later tonight, taking down all of Manberg's beloved heroes and hated villains down with him).

"Everything alright, Toms?" Wilbur whispers, so softly over the whistling sound of cold wind, that Tommy just about breaks, gulping down something stuck in his throat.

It's grown increasingly hard to lie to Wilbur— hell, it's grown hard to lie to *anyone* in the Craft family, which explains his dumb little mix-up from the night before (that left him close to breaking down for the entire night until Phil reassured him everything was okay, and Techno and Wilbur both promised to keep it a secret).

But still... Tommy's just as much a broken record as he is a reflection of what used to be.

"I'm fine," he chokes out, and as always, his tone fails him, because Wilbur's suddenly making soft noises and wrapping another arm around him, tugging him impossibly closer into a warm jumper that smells of firewood and sea salt.

"Oh, sunshine," he murmurs, pressing his face into Tommy's curls as the boy sobs into his neck, running a hand up and down his back, "Shhh, it's okay, I'm here. You're okay. Nothing's ever gonna happen to you, not with me around."

Tommy knows he's wrong, but he can't find it in him to disagree. That little spark of hope that's lingered, like a dwindling flame at the bottom of his heart, is close to igniting, because maybe, just for once, he can be happy.

He knows deep down that he *can't*, that his fate has already been decided for him, but as a parting gift, he allows himself to practically dissolve in Wilbur's arms, just for a couple more minutes.

He chokes on another sob; honestly, Wilbur's nickname for him had only made everything so much worse.

He's never had a nickname like sunshine before. It was always *brat* or *prick*, if even that. Usually he was just plain *Theseus*.

Never Tommy, and certainly never *sunshine*.

There's so many things that Tommy wants to say, so many words that he wants to paint on a canvas, to announce, to *sing* if he could, to write down like long lost poetry and shove it into those he wishes to speak to's hands, but there's so little time.

(The quote he'd been told, of never truly realizing that you had something until it's gone, drives daggers into his back and he only squeezes his eyes shut tighter).

If there were words to make up everything he wants to say in one small sentence, it would probably be something along the lines of *I love you*, but he can't find the strength to say it.

He's wanted to say it before; whenever Tubbo jumps in his car at half past three just to drive over and make sure Tommy's alright and even staying the night to whenever Ranboo would come over and (hesitantly) redye the tips of his hair red.

To Sam, with his ridiculous green and brown hair and lopsided smiles and arms constantly dusted with flour. To his little dog, Fran, who Tommy can't help but adore.

(He doesn't realize how much he really misses Sam, misses the way the man would wrap him up in hugs that made him feel like he was being hugged by a warm hearth, or the feeling of having a father, even if Tommy knew that it was never meant to be).

Hell, Tommy even wanted to say those words the night before when Techno had soothed his nerves with the story of Icarus. He wanted to say it when Phil presented him with a great stack of buttermilk pancakes doused with that strange white sugar powder atop earlier that morning, gently promising him that he's going to be okay.

And he *especially* wants to say it now, as Wilbur whispers gentle promises into his ear and his hair, holding him so close that he can smell the lingering scent of his favourite place in the Craft household: the library.

But he can't.

Tommy can't say it.

He has before, only once, and he never will again.

Tommy knows that he's just stalling at this point, letting his thoughts consume him because he knows that the second Wilbur lets go of him, the *second* that he walks over that threshold and into his dingy apartment, he can never return into the man's arms again.

It's a death sentence where he has to go tonight, and he's known it from the start, but he has to attend, has to actually be there and witness the man who ruined everything about him, made him the way he is today— he has to see it happen.

He has to know, or it will crawl up his throat for the rest of his life, tugging at him from the inside out until he can't take it anymore.

They say that revenge is a dish best served cold, but he has always believed that it's one that's served at its finest, the perfect temperature and presentation, but the moment you

believe it's there, the second you realize that it truly is a *tangible* thing, it's gone.

So Tommy takes in a shaky breath, and he whispers one word with all he has before he breaks.

*"Please."*

Wilbur just about shatters with him, wrapping the boy in his trench coat and humming softly under his breath; a tune that Tommy's never heard before. It's caring and it's warm, and every syllable screams the lost feeling of a family that Tommy's never had.

It feels like hours before Tommy's let everything out of his system — he hadn't cried in *so long* — and Wilbur's carefully carding his fingers through the boy's curls as he sniffles against the man's cardigan.

"I'm sorry," Tommy mumbles.

"No, no, don't be," Wilbur whispers in return, "Don't ever be sorry for the way you're feeling, Toms. It's not your fault, and it never will be. You can't control your emotions or who you are. Don't ever apologize to me, okay?"

Tommy bites his tongue to keep from disagreeing and simply nods slowly against the man's collarbone.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Wilbur talks again after a couple moments, and then the lodge is back in Tommy's throat and he feels like he just might choke on his own breath.

Instead, he shakes his head profusely.

"I understand," Wilbur promises, putting a strand of hair behind Tommy's hair with a gentle smile before poking the other side of his head at the little French braid just above his ear.

“Did Techno do this for you?”

Tommy smiles a little, despite himself, and sniffs, “Yeah, he, uhm— he’s great, Techno.”

“He really is,” Wilbur agrees, pressing a finger gently against the small little braid. “It looks like he wove a golden strand into it as well.”

Tommy snorts, “He did. He insisted that it ‘had to be done’, or whatever.”

“Sounds like him. He’s a big gold freak, if you will,” Wilbur says, the smile evident in his voice.

“No shit.”

Wilbur chuckles warmly, and Tommy just smiles to himself, backing out of Wilbur’s arms just a tad so he can reach up and run at the burning to his cheeks from the salty tears.

“Tommy,” Wilbur begins, catching the boy’s attention suddenly with how hesitant he sounds, “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

Uh oh, Tommy thinks, heart sinking.

“What’s that, big man?”

“You... you do realize that you’re a part of our... family now, right?” Wilbur begins, scanning Tommy’s face with anxious eyes for any sign of a negative expression.

“Yeah, but... it... it’s just a bit, innit?” Tommy responds, blinking a little at the suddenness of this question.

Wilbur makes a sour face, and Tommy shrinks a little.

“It’s... Tommy, it’s not just a bit,” he whispers, sounding almost sad. “We... we really—”

Wilbur coughs a little, and Tommy can feel the tears pricking in the corners of his eyes.

“We really think of you as our little brother,” Wilbur finishes, and Tommy smiles sadly.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, big man,” Wilbur reaches out to ruffle Tommy’s hair softly, almost looking like he’s about to cry himself, “And, uhm... because of that we just... we all chipped in and want to give you something.”

Tommy raises an eyebrow as Wilbur rummages around anxiously in his trouser pockets, before pulling out a tiny, velvet box, almost like what a pair of shiny earrings would go in.

“We know that you haven’t, uhm, got pierced ears or anything like Tech and Phil,” Wilbur shifts uncomfortably, “So we improvised, just as they had to do for me.”

Wilbur stuffs the box nervously into Tommy’s hands, who looks at it curiously.

It feels too expensive for him to even be *breathing* on, and he has to steady his hands greatly in order to open it without the possibilities of dropping it on the floor and breaking whatever is inside.

Something glints in his vision and his eyes widen a tad as he opens the box all the way.

Sitting on a velvet cushion, all neat and bright as day, is a little emerald attached to a golden chain, much like the matching emeralds attached to Phil and Techno's earlobes.

"Holy shit," Tommy whispers, and he can feel another sob coming on but he holds it down as he shakily takes the long necklace from the box, holding it up so he can properly see it. "Oh — oh my stars, Wil, it's... are— is this— this is for *me*?"

Wilbur laughs wetly, "Yes, Tommy, it's for you."

Tommy coughs, concealing an oncoming sob, before turning to Wilbur, eyes full of tears.

"You're serious?" he squeaks out, and the man just smiles softly.

"Of course," he promises, before motioning with his hand a little, "Come closer and I'll put it on for you, yeah?"

Tommy inches closer and delicately holds the chain out towards Wilbur, who takes it and then slowly lowers it over the boy's head, smiling wider when it rests atop his jumper.

"There," he murmurs, touching the gemstone delicately, "Now we're all matching."

"Where's yours?" Tommy asks, eyeing Wilbur's ear for any signs of a dangling emerald, and the man just grins sheepishly before pulling a golden chain identical to Tommy's from underneath his shirt.

"Right here," the man says, holding his out so Tommy can see and smiling all the more when Tommy holds his own out.

"We— you and I are matching," Tommy says, blinking back tears.

“Well, it’s only fair that we match if Phil and Techno get to match, right?” Wilbur concludes, and Tommy snuffles again.

“Thank you,” he whispers, already feeling the hot tears stinging his cheeks before he can get the words out, and Wilbur’s hugging him tightly again, pressing him close.

“Always,” Wilbur promises, and Tommy believes him.

“I don’t wanna say goodbye,” Tommy chokes out, and Wilbur tugs him tighter, if possible.

“You don’t have to.”

“I do, I do, I—”

“No,” Wilbur insists, tone stern but gentle, “You never have to say goodbye. Not to me.”

“What should I say, then?”

“How about ‘until we meet again’?”

Tommy smiles into the man’s jumper, sniffing, “Okay. Until we meet again, Wilbur Soot.”

“*When* we meet again, Tommy Innit,” Wilbur corrects, and it sounds like a promise.

“*When* we meet again,” Tommy repeats softly, even though he knows it’s a lie.

---



The scent of musty arm chairs and pristine, bleach washed marble flooring is overwhelming. Tommy can't help the way he scrunches his nose up while Hannah skims her way around his waist, poking him with pins and making a frown whenever he winces.

"Sorry," she apologizes each time, elegant pink wings fluttering behind her. They match her own gala dress; a lovely silk pink thing that flows down to the ground with a slit up the side, allowing anyone to see the pretty pink heels that weave up her calves. Even her heels have wings attached on the back, and Tommy can't help but feel a spark of jealousy.

Tommy never took Hannah as a friend of Quackity; he didn't even know that they were buddies. Back when the guy still had his old apartment, Hannah sometimes came over in accompany of a few others Tommy would rather not remember, but she and Quackity weren't *friends*.

Hannah maneuvers her way around Tommy again, eyebrows strewn together with little pins sticking out her mouth.

She looks really pretty today, with the flowers piled atop her brown curls and glittery makeup glinting underneath the elegant chandeliers overhead. Tommy almost envies the way she's got gold dripping from every angle, from the tips of her pointed ears to the very bottom of them.

(He has to smile at how much he'd know Techno would appreciate it; dumbass gold enthusiast).

Hannah's hair is done all nice as well and smells overwhelmingly like a variety of flowers and overgrowth; Tommy makes sure he doesn't inhale it too much.

He knows how faeries are. They aren't always sunshine and roses like they smell and act.

"That should be all good now," Hannah announces, backing away from Tommy and looking at her work with a contemplative expression, long fingernail pressed to her jawline, before

beaming. “You look all dressed up now! How lovely.”

Tommy snorts, shifting on his feet and pulling at the heavy sleeves of his deep crimson suit. He hates wearing all this formal shit. When he was a hero— if you could even call him that — he was forced to go to these sorts of assemblies all the time.

Back then, he was excited to be escorted around with people who had previously been his idols, stars in his eyes as he shook hands with people who would never know him as anything more than Morpheus’ little protégé.

(He always hoped for more, always expected to become more than what he was, but that was shattered the day he “died”).

“Do you want to see how you look?” Hannah asks suddenly, producing a small, hand-held mirror.

Tommy bites down hard on the inside of his cheek. He isn’t sure. Even though he’s completely aware of how minuscule the mirror is (really, it’d be impossible to see his entire suit in it even if he stood five feet away), he’s not too big of a fan at looking in the mirror in general.

(He always sees someone he can’t recognize looking back at him and has to avert his eyes before it only construes more).

“I don’t know,” he admits meekly, and Hannah gives him a reassuring, albeit lopsided smile.

“No problem,” she says simply, waving her hand away so that the small golden mirror she’d produced disappears into thin air, “How about I just fetch Quackity, then?”

“That’d be great,” Tommy murmurs, giving her a weak smile until she flutters out the door of the dressing room.

He stands there for a while by himself, holding his arms out and examining the way that the red, expensive fabric falls off of him. He remembers a while ago when Quackity had thrown an arm around him and told him, while laughing profusely, that if they ever made it big, that they'd probably walk around wearing matching suits and act like they didn't know anyone.

It was a better time, and Tommy can't help but smile bitterly at the memory, even though he's more than certain if he asked, Quackity wouldn't remember it.

He didn't remember much anymore, unfortunately.

The door to his right swings open with force and Tommy flinches in his place, watching Quackity stride in with an amount of grandeur, his arms spread wide open the way he does nowadays. It's another "new Quackity thing" that Tommy can't quite understand.

"Tommy, man, you look great!" Quackity announces with a large grin that shows off all of his teeth, reaching out and smacking Tommy on the back enthusiastically. He's wearing a matching suit, but his is a deep navy blue instead of red. "I always knew that red was your colour."

Tommy makes a face at that.

He wasn't entirely wrong.

"Have you even seen how you look yet? You look fucking *sick*, man," Quackity continues, poking one of the golden cusps on Tommy's suit jacket.

"Mirrors aren't exactly my fort , Bi— Quackity."

Quackity smiles a little sadly, but doesn't comment on the name change.

(Tommy hadn't called him 'Big Q' in months).

"Oh come on, just have a look," Quackity insists after a moment, walking to the other side of the room to pull a golden framed mirror from where it's been leaning against a wall. He carries it over with ease and sets it down in front of Tommy, who makes a face the second he locks eyes with himself.

He's... the same as he was the last time he forced himself to look in a mirror. His hair's slightly longer, just barely hovering over his shoulders like a small mullet, bangs close to concealing his eyes. They're dusted red as they always are, and there's still a tiny French braid tucked behind his ear.

(Within the braid is a golden piece, weaved into each of the strands, something that Techno had practically insisted he added while braiding Tommy's hair, and really, how could Tommy say no to something so incredibly cool?)

(If he looks close enough, Tommy can also see the golden chain just barely from where it's tucked underneath his suit, and something almost overwhelmingly warm fills him when he remembers what's attached to the end. A constant little note of a family he will miss. He just hopes that when he dies, they'll bury him in it and top his grave with the prettiest flowers).

Even as Tommy takes in his slightly changed appearance, from the longer hair to the new scars... everything about Tommy screams unchanged, of undeniable *familiarity*, and he wants to be ill at the very realization.

It's all the exact same; from the way he stands, to the dark bags that cling underneath his eyes, to the dullness of his eye colour and the fidgeting of his hands.

He doesn't want to be the same, though— hell, that's why he dyed the tips of his hair in the first place.

He doesn't want to look in the mirror and see the same dull *kid* that he's known for the past fifteen years.

It's like rereading the same paragraph in a book over and over again because you can't quite grasp what the author's saying and yet, each time you read it, you grow more and more weary from how the words stick and jumble in your mind, until you give up and close the book shut.

(He especially hates how right Morpheus had been, hands steady on his shoulders as the two looked in the mirror, the man's mask removed for one of the only times in his life, a large grin spread across his face because he and Tommy were the *same*. Two pieces of the same puzzle, two shards that belong to a stained glass window).

(Two incredibly arrogant boys with blonde hair and freckles who sought out to be the best they could. They were like brothers, and they probably still would be).

Tommy averts his eyes, feeling sick all of a sudden. Something sour pricks on his tongue and he has the feeling that he kind of just wants to book it and run, to return to where he was the night before (the comforting feeling of a household that wasn't his, but felt like it belonged to him, anyways).

(It wasn't meant to be, nothing ever is when it involves him, because he's *Tommy* and the world doesn't love him, no matter how much he loves it).

"Okay," he mutters, voice wavering as he fumbles with his hands. He hates the way that his clothes stick uncomfortably to the plasters wrapped around his arms and his torso. "I look... pog."

Quackity snorts, "You do, Tommy, you do. Very poggery, actually."

Tommy cracks a smile, despite himself. It's such a Quackity thing to say. He just wishes that it was coming from him and not whatever— *whoever* he was now.

"You haven't even added the finishing touches, though," Quackity adds now, tone mysterious enough to make Tommy frown.

The door clicks again and Slimecicle eagerly walks in, bouncing on his feet like an overly excited dog, carrying two items in his hands.

“What do you mean?” Tommy murmurs cautiously, even as his heart sinks. He isn’t sure he even wants to know where the man’s going with this anymore.

It was hell enough that he had to go to a peaceful banquet that most of his enemies (fucking — if not *all* of them, supposedly) would be attending.

“You can’t go to a masquerade ball without a mask, you know,” Quackity chides with a tsk, holding his hand out so Slimecicle can place a delicately crafted red and golden mask in his hand. “Thanks, Charlie.”

“You’re welcome, Quackity from Las Nevadas!” the slime hybrid jeers excitedly, before walking right up to Tommy, grinning.

“Hi, Charlie,” Tommy greets, smiling slightly as the hybrid looks up at him expectantly.

“Hello, TommyInnit!” Slime responds, before holding up its enclosed fist, “Dab me up?”

Snorting, Tommy presses his fist against Charlie’s, having to bite down another smile when the hybrid bounces up and down excitedly before exiting the room with a final and animated goodbye.

The boy turns back to Quackity now, who holds out the ruby and golden mask towards him, but keeping the blue and golden one clutched secretively in his free hand.

Tommy probably should’ve expected that this gala would be a masquerade ball of some sorts. Can’t have both heroes and supervillains in the same place without keeping identities sacred, after all.

“That thing won’t hide my identity, idiot,” Tommy grumbles, taking the thing from Quackity’s hands gingerly and examining it. “It’s *tiny*. It will probably barely even cover half of my face.”

“Yeah, *but*, ” Quackity reaches up and plucks the beanie off of his head and plops it down atop Tommy’s curls, bending down to tuck his bangs up underneath it, “This might be of some help, don’t you think?”

Tommy blinks and fidgets a little, hating how he’s being filled with an overwhelming warmth at the action. Quackity used to let him borrow his beanie all the time when things were different; glaring playfully whenever Tommy would snatch the hat off of his head and curse him out until he’d bring it back.

It’s nice to have it back again, even if it is only for tonight, for a formal event where keeping his identity in check is probably one of the most important feats of the night.

“I look good,” Tommy tries weakly, despite barely even glancing in the mirror again, and Quackity laughs loudly, patting his shoulder.

“With that beanie on, you’ll be practically unstoppable,” the man promises, and his tone reflects something gentle, “Plus, people will know not to fuck with you when you’re wearing that. It’s sort of like... a signature, if you will.”

Tommy shudders a little, “What exactly does that mean?”

“They’ll know you’re under my protection, basically,” Quackity says with a sharp grin, standing up straight. “Maybe I’ll tell them that we’re coworkers, or family or something.”

*Family.*

Tommy smiles a little more, “That’ll really work?”

“People know not to question me in this city,” Quackity breathes, bordering on dangerous when he sneers, “Nobody will touch you, alright? You can just sit back and enjoy the festivities and... what comes after.”

“‘What comes after’?” he repeats warily.

“You know. The very reason I recruited you to come in the first place,” Quackity hums, leaning close to his ear, “Destroying every last fucking one of these assholes.”

Tommy clenches his jaw, but holds his ground, toes curling in his shoes. Fucking hell.

He had already known this was the plan from the beginning, of course — bring all of them into one building at once so that they can all be destroyed one by one, inevitably “setting Manberg free”, as Quackity had called it.

But...

“Do they really deserve it, though?” he asks in a whisper before he can even stop himself.

“They *all* do,” Quackity hisses, eyes flashing dangerously, “Villains and heroes alike, Tommy. They’re terrible fucking people.”

“How can you be so sure...?”

Quackity just smiles.



“I know what I’m doing, Tommy,” he promises darkly, patting him on the back again. His face takes on something more sympathetic when Tommy winces, and he continues, although a bit softer, “And Bad does, too.”

Bad... Tommy had nearly forgotten that this whole esteemed “peace party” was originally planned out by the presumably benevolent demon hybrid.

It was strange how Tommy once knew the guy to be kind in all ways— he never cursed and always seemed to be on Tommy’s side of things, no matter how much the kid irritated him.

(There was even a time once when Tommy had come to Bad’s shop downtown at half past ten, far after “lights out”, half-beaten and bloody and slumping down on a barstool, letting the demon hybrid watch him with sad eyes and give him free muffins and hot chocolate).

(It was one of the last times he ever saw Bad).

“You know, Toms...” Quackity begins now, voice much gentler this time as he pokes the bracelet on the boy’s wrist, the one that he, Purpled, and even *Slimecicle* all have matching copies of. “Nobody’s going to know who you are tonight. It wouldn’t kill you to take that off and—”

“No,” Tommy interjects, glaring at the man and reaching his hand out to fiddle with the charm, “No. I— no. I’m never taking it off.”

Quackity smiles, albeit sadly, and backs away, “Okay. If you say so, Tommy.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Tommy stares at the floor, the way the lights shine on the tips of Quackity’s too polished shoes.

“I’m going to go check on Purpled and make sure that the rest of the preparations are going well for the banquet. I’ll come fetch you once everything’s ready, alright?” Quackity begins, tone quieter than usual.

Tommy just nods, hand still clasped protectively over the bracelet until Quackity exits the room, door shutting behind him with a creak.

Averting his eyes from the ground, Tommy walks forwards and picks up the mirror - it's a lot heavier than he had expected - and flips it around, coughing as he turns it so that it's reflecting the wall instead.

He won't look at himself unless he has to.

Perhaps when he dies tonight, this time the last thing he sees won't be the doppelgänger of himself, smiling at him with dull eyes and a regretful smile.

Maybe this time, his death will be by his own doing and it will be *peaceful*, like it always should've been.

## Chapter End Notes

i tried to write angst and uhhhhhghj i am Not cut out for this holy shit . crack/fluff my beloved .

(fair warning for anyone who isn't an angst enjoyer: any chapter title that's also a song lyric will most likely be an angst chapter :) /gen !)

author drabble:

-right so, no cause for concern made me cry Genuine tears so ive decided i'm gonna make u all cry /j /lh

- i'm thinking abt making a discord or a twitter but social media is terrifying & idk which one is better lmao. pls let me know<3

- i'm sick again fellas, i might have food poisoning which sucks so ! i apologize if the next chap isn't out for a while<3 ily /p

ggguyyyss we got o!crimeboyysj :(((/pos we got them we saw them they're brothers i'm gonna cry.

# **“blow out the candles,” — part II**

## Chapter Summary

(chap title from black & blue birds by dave matthews band)

A hand lands on his shoulder and he flinches about half a foot, turning around with eyes wide, as though he'd expected some random person that knows him to be there. He relaxes only slightly when he meets Quackity's elated gaze, huffing and turning back around, shoulders tense.

"I was wondering when you'd finally make your appearance, Icarus," Quackity says with a fixed grin, and Tommy swallows bile at the nickname.

It's an awful coincidence.

The universe really does hate him at this point.

or, it's banquet time babey. uh oh lmao

## Chapter Notes

hello internet, welcome to game theory. today i'm here to tell you i wrote this chapter & half of the next one on the awkward cusp / limbo between REM-sleep and awake. apologies for typos or anything el em ay oh<3

---

twos: self hatred / self deprecating thoughts, unreliable narrator (!!! this is super heavy this chapter), implied underage drinking, talk of drowning & heavily implied past child abuse, anxiety attack, internalized transphobia (it's very mild though dw<3), implications of future character death/suicidal thoughts & very, very morally gray actions.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy can hear the elegant playing of a piano before he even reaches the main doorway that leads from the hallway to the ballroom.

It's a song he recognizes— one he had learned over years of sneaking into one of the music rooms in the Complex late at night, eyes squinting in the darkness to try and make out music notes.

Debussy's *Clair de Lune*.

He knew it like he knew every wind and bend of the alleyways in his district.

(If he was placed in front of a grand piano, he could probably play it with his eyes closed despite having not played in months. It was like the way a soldier knows how to tear down an army in war. It's a thing of creature comfort almost; kind of like second nature at this point).

"It's one of the classics," George had told him once with a snort, flicking the side of his head but signaling with a side-eyed glance that this would be kept a secret. The two were never truly close, but George always seemed to have Tommy's best interests in mind— even if it was very far back in his mind, nonetheless.

(Still, Tommy's grateful to this day).

He pauses now, fingers twitching over the golden handle, listening to the distant notes of the song, almost feeling the phantom of piano keys underneath the pads of his fingers.

It doesn't last long, and he can feel Charlie watching him curiously, practically breathing over his shoulder. The hybrid had been assigned to "chauffeur" him to the ballroom or something, as if Quackity believed he'd get lost on the way.

Mother hen.

“Tommy?” Charlie calls, but his voice is almost distant.

Tommy... was having second thoughts about this whole thing again.

It was almost saddening how quickly he'd gone from wanting to follow suit with this idea — excited at the very thought of finally dismantling the entirety of the prejudiced system that had forced its way down his throat for years — to wanting the opposite.

Sure, he wanted to step out there into the banquet with his head held high, to allow Quackity to parade him around and introduce him to the people he already knows, to let it sink in how all of them — well, *most* of them — will soon be gone.

But another part of him didn't.

Another part of Tommy, one he hadn't even truly realized was there, wanted something else. It wanted to run, to leave this city and never come back, to pick up all his things (and his makeshift “family”) and ditch every puzzle piece of Manberg that had made him this way.

At least he had said goodbye to Tubbo and Ranboo before coming... and Will and Phil... and Techno...

(He's going to miss Phil's cooking and Techno's storytelling and Wilbur's warm hugs... and Tubbo's erratic behaviour that so perfectly matches his own, and Ranboo's way of shielding him, almost like a bodyguard he doesn't need...)

“Tommy Innit,” the slime hybrid repeats, and Tommy has to hold back a wince at his own name (because even though he had basically named himself, it still hurt to hear anything relating to him). “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” Tommy whispers, clearing his throat until he’s speaking normally again, turning to face the hybrid, who smiles brightly at him. “Just— you know... social anxiety, innit?”

Charlie nods enthusiastically, as if totally understanding, “I know exactly what you mean, yep! Social anxiety is not poggers.”

Tommy snorts, despite how much he just wants to flee, “Yeah. Social anxiety is not poggers.”

“Do you wanna know what I do when I’m anxious?” Charlie asks, and Tommy hums. He’s got nothing better to do and, well... he’s stalling. He won’t admit it, but he definitely would rather do anything else than pull this door open and face a crowd of faces that he knows, but will never know him.

(Not until the night’s climax, at the very least).

“I tell puns,” Charlie chirps, and Tommy lets out a shaky laugh. He doesn’t know what else he had expected, really. “Even to myself sometimes, in the mirror! Just to help!”

Tommy smiles a little. If no one else, at least *Charlie’s* here. Even though he was practically attached to Quackity’s hip at all times, the guy still made Tommy laugh when he needed it.

“Why don’t you tell me a pun, then, Charlie Slimecicle?” Tommy asks, readjusting the hem of one of his white gloves. He still hated the things, but it was Quackity’s idea, so there wasn’t really much he could do about it.

“Okay!” Charlie rocks back onto his heels and frowns greatly, tapping his chin with his own hand (it was really weird, seeing the slime hybrid in his human form. Tommy rarely saw him like this, and the silver bracelet with the red gemstone hung from the man’s wrist, as if antagonizing him). “How’s this, then—? Listen, listen— Quackity told me this one!”

Tommy makes a face, but does his best to smile as encouragingly as he can muster anyways.

“So, so— do you know what a funeral is, Tommy Innit?”

“Unfortunately,” Tommy blinks a little, stomach swirling with something strange. *When he died, did they hold a funeral for him, like they did for Imperial?* “Where, uhm... where are you going with this?”

“Well, I have to say that I hate funerals because they’re always at nine in the morning and I’m not a *mourning* person!” Charlie grins, clapping his hands together and then holding his fist out, “Am I right? Dab me up!”

Tommy narrows his eyes but exhales, holding back the smallest of smiles as he presses a closed fist against Charlie’s, “Quackity told you that one, huh?”

“Yep! He’s very smart, Quackity of Las Nevadas, isn’t he?”

“Sure,” Tommy purses his lips, straining a smile, before lowering his shaking hand and facing the two, elegant double-doors again.

“Are you feeling better, Tommy Innit? Did the pin help?” Charlie asks, and Tommy exhales.

“Yes, I— I think so. Thank you, Charlie. Really.”

“Anything for you, Tommy Innit of Manberg,” Charlie reassures, smiling warmly despite how icy his words seem to be.

‘Tommy Innit of Manberg.’

Give him a break.



Tommy doesn't respond, deciding that he needs to quit stalling as he reaches his hand out, closing his fingers over the door handle and letting out a low breath.

Nobody will know it's him. Not a single person, not until the end.

He's fine. Everything's fine.

Quackity would never try to intentionally sabotage him. They were— well, they were family, almost.

Family doesn't turn on one another.

(Something claws at the back of his head, a desperate attempt to try and remind him of the last time he'd called someone family, but he ignores it for the time being. What does it matter if he's going to be dead by midnight anyways?)

"TommyInnit, before you go, I wanted to tell you," Charlie begins, interrupting Tommy's thoughts with the strange tone to his voice. The boy turns to him, eyebrow raised, watching as the slime hybrid smiles warmly. "You and Quackity— you're my best friends, you know."

Tommy's eyes burn and he returns the hybrid's smile, albeit shakily.

"Thank you, Charlie."

With one last long breath, Tommy turns and pulls the door open. The glitz and glitter of chandeliers and an over abundance of gold nearly has him running back into the dressing rooms, but with a final glance in Charlie's direction (who is giving him a patient smile), he enters the ballroom.

If he's going to die tonight, at least he will have Charlie by his side. Hopefully.

---

Techno wasn't sure what exactly he had expected of a supposed "peace party" dictated by a demon hybrid, but it certainly wasn't *this*.

The banquet hall is lined with gold and red in every direction. Pretty, decorative drapery hangs from the ceiling. Out of the corner of his eye, Techno could see Wilbur's nose wrinkling underneath his mask.

His twin wasn't a fan of "extraordinary" displays of grandeur. He always preferred a more natural appearance, like Phil's house. It was more "homey" that way, apparently. Techno personally couldn't care less about the layout of a house, much less a ballroom.

(Even so, allowing himself to be removed from his Piglin hybrid form for a moment... he had to admit that all the gold was a nice touch).

Still, the ballroom looked almost like it had come out of a scene from a movie based on royalty and kings and fantasy. Techno resists the urge to grimace.

"Could they have made it any less pretentious?" Wilbur grumbles sarcastically, hissing in annoyance when Phil pokes him in the side with his elbow warningly.

"They're heroes," Phil reminds him simply, bowing his head to one of the butlers standing in waiting at the front of the ballroom, "What really did you expect, mate?"

Techno holds back a snort as Wilbur characteristically rolls his eyes, hand reaching up to reposition the white masquerade thing covering his face. It's etched with blue sapphires and gold lacing, whereas Techno's is decorated with rubies, and Phil's with emeralds.

“Let’s just get this over with, alright?” Wilbur murmurs, running a hand through his hair before striding fully into the ballroom, head turning as he takes in everyone around them.

It’s a lively event, as Techno had expected.

Nearly half of Manberg’s hero and villain population (and *vigilante*, it seems, with a glance over at Cosmos, who’s talking animatedly in the corner to Arsonist) are here.

Huh.

Techno narrows his eyes, turning away from his family as they venture through the ballroom (Phil pausing to converse politely with the Captain and Wilbur sticking to the outskirts, scanning for any threats).

He sees a lot of people he recognizes.

Standing on the other side of the room is hero number two of the infamous Dee Team (or the “deez nuts” team, as Tommy had stated proudly once, and Techno has to cough so he doesn’t laugh at the memory).

Hypnos, Greek god of sleep himself. It’s really agitating how the *heroes* get to use Greek mythology based names. Maybe that’s what made him become a villain; definitely not the need to dismantle the corrupt Manberg government.

Techno’s never had anything against the hero though in retrospect, other than the fact that they were both two sides of different coins: Hypnos was a hero, and Techno was a villain. They were destined to be enemies, so it only made sense that they didn’t speak with one another.

Even so, it was a little strange that when Hypnos caught sight of him — he had previously been listening to some random hero speak, head inclined in their direction — that he bowed his head in almost... respect?

Techno imitates the action then turns away.

Something's off about this.

That's what he gathered right off the bat.

Sure, it's some strange peace party that a *demon hybrid* of all people arranged (don't even get him started on the irony of it all), but there also seemed to be some strange tension in the air.

As if nobody understood why they were really here, even though the invitation card was pretty clear. They were here to state a truce, to bring Manberg together as a whole.

("Fat chance," Wilbur had snorted lazily, earning a glare from Phil, but no argument. There really was no chance in hell).

So why were they here?

Certainly everyone knew that there would never be any sort of reconciliation between heroes and villains, right?

Then again...

Techno's eyes skimmed the room again, narrowing as he tried to scout the person responsible for this entire shindig.

Bad, his name was, who should be sticking out like a sore thumb (demon hybrids were naturally gigantic in height), but it almost looked like he wasn't even here.

Another red flag, amongst the others, but Techno had already planned for if this situation were to turn in the wrong direction (sticking a pocket knife far down into his hunting boots just in case and warning Wilbur and Phil for a fight. They were already aware, though).

The gentle piano music continues, and Techno walks along the outskirts of the party (watching cautiously as Wilbur speaks quietly to Nemesis and Dimensional in the corner, eyes flicking around the room just as Techno's are).

Hopefully, this is just a normal peace banquet created to try and form some sort of alliance between the two parties (*three*, Techno reminds himself after scouting Ranboo— or Particle — who stands nervously beside their teammate).

Techno just crosses his arms and decides to wait this whole thing out— starting with when the host finally makes an appearance.

---

Tommy's eyes scan over the ballroom as he walks in, hands clutched behind his back, trying to maintain as much of a calm and collected appearance as he can possibly fathom.

His breath becomes almost caught in his throat as he takes in the scenery; if he thought that the dressing rooms were extravagant, it's nothing compared to this ballroom he never knew existed, with its high vaulted ceilings and golden spires and red carpeted hallways. It looks like something out of a live action Disney movie, really, and he isn't sure if that irritates or fascinated him.

Everyone's wearing masks, as he had expected; elegant things held to their face with sticks or wrapped around their heads with a string. They're all donning pretty clothing that Tommy isn't sure he should even be in the same room as, despite the rich suit he has on. (Instinctively, he reaches up to check that Quackity's beanie is still fastened atop his head well and that the mask he's wearing hasn't fallen off).

As Tommy skims over the faces and postures of some of the people, he realizes that he can recognize a couple of them-- from the Captain, who stands with an air of superiority on the

other side of the room, her hand poised on her hip, multicoloured hair fluffed behind her making her hard not to stick out in a crowd. She's speaking with someone that Tommy hasn't seen before (he can only assume it's another Hero, what with the reputation of heroes rarely being in 'cahoots' with villains).

Tommy gulps a little at how many people he truly cannot recognize, shrinking back towards the doors. Had he really been out of the picture that long? Had there been seriously this many changes to the whole "justice system" (or whatever they called it)?

A hand lands on his shoulder and he flinches about half a foot, turning around with eyes wide, as though he'd expected some random person that knows him to be there. He relaxes only slightly when he meets Quackity's elated gaze, huffing and turning back around, shoulders tense.

"I was wondering when you'd finally make your appearance, *Icarus*," Quackity says with a fixed grin, and Tommy swallows bile at the nickname.

It's an awful coincidence.

The universe really does hate him at this point.

"What's with the dumb code name?" he murmurs, hands reaching up to refasten a button on his vest, hating how incredibly hot and uncomfortable the air is in here. It's difficult being around so many people at once after being nearly reclusive for several months.

"Nobody needs to know that you're you until the end, right?" Quackity reminds him under his breath, patting Tommy's shoulder placatingly. "Just decided to stick with a Greek nickname that best suits you rather than— you know. The old one."

*The boy that fell out of the sky*, Tommy recalls as he glances humourlessly at Quackity, trying to hold himself back from stomping on the man's too shiny shoes, *Fucking asshole*.

“So what took you so long?” Quackity decides to ask after a second of prolonged silence.

"Just had to, uh, prepare myself, I guess," Tommy mutters, tone still bitter as he flits his gaze towards the ground, "I'm not used to being around so many people."

"I get it, I get it," Quackity reassures, slinging his arm around Tommy's shoulders and shuffling him closer to his side, beginning to weave him through the crowd of people (is that - is that fucking *Purpled*, chauffeuring people around? He has to conceal a snort at this, making a mental note to tease the kid for it later on). "It's been quite a while since you've been in the whole, you know. Crowd."

"You seem pretty calm being in it without being a part of them yourself," Tommy grumbles, something knotting in his gut as Quackity shuffles the two of them around an extremely tall guy, who looks incredibly familiar in his sparkling gold and emerald green suit. Tommy decides not to think too much about it. Morpheus wouldn't be here. Not yet, at least. Quackity wouldn't do that to him.

(Right?)

"Oh, Toms," Quackity hums, pausing to grin and wave with his free hand at someone they pass by (Tommy glances the person's way, almost recoiling when he recognizes the infamous Cosmos from on television-- wasn't that guy a vigilante or something?)

Before Quackity can continue whatever it was he was going to say, there's the clinking of metal meeting glass, and everyone's gaze turns in unison to someone at the very middle of the ballroom, who has shown up completely out of nowhere.

The two of them pause to face them and— oh.

Tommy knows exactly who it is immediately.

Bad, standing in all of his glory, with a black and red suit fastened on, sharp horns decorated in ringlets of gold and rubies, white eyes crinkling in the void of his face. It's strangely a bittersweet moment, seeing the demon hybrid again. On one hand, Tommy almost wants to act on instinct and run up to the man, half expecting to earn one of the hybrid's infamous kind smiles and a muffin in return. On the other hand... it *feels* different.

(Or maybe he just looks slightly different. It has been six months, after all).

"Friends!" Bad announces, and Tommy clenches his jaw at his tone. It sounds sweet, but not the classic Bad sort of sweet. It's almost sickly, like the hybrid is putting on a facade for everyone in here. The bad feeling that had begun to form at the very pit of Tommy's gut only a few hours ago begins to make its reappearance. "It's wonderful to see all of you together, not fighting, for once, isn't it?"

There is no response, and Bad just laughs lightly, as though he had expected that.

Again, Tommy shifts on his feet, suddenly uncomfortable with the weight of Quackity's arm lingering on his shoulders. Certainly the guy wasn't dumb, right? He could feel the same tension in the air as Tommy could, right?

"Well, that was a wonderful response," Bad jokes, earning a couple of cough (probably pitied) laughs from his rather reproachful audience. "Now, look-- I know you're all probably thinking, 'Why would Bad invite us here? Isn't this all just... counterproductive?' And you'd be right! I knew what could potentially happen the day that I decided to host this banquet, but I always come prepared."

Tommy wasn't sure what 'prepared' meant, but as he glanced at the way Purpled shuffled by a pair of closed doors on one side and Hannah by the other doors on the opposite end, he had a feeling he was beginning to realize exactly what Bad meant.

"What exactly is the point of all this?" A voice speaks up suddenly, cutting over Bad's monologue, and everyone's heads turn, facing the Captain, whose head is tilted, eyes scrutinizing the demon hybrid behind her mask. It's strange the way she's looking at him; even Tommy feels confused. Weren't the two friends back at the Complex? "If you already knew what could possibly happen, why would you even risk this? The chances of us establishing any sort of peace..."



The Captain sucks in air through her teeth and Tommy can feel Quackity hum to his right. The air is heavy with tension, and Tommy has a feeling that everyone— even villains— are silently agreeing with her.

"It's just as I said," Bad replies calmly, smiling at Captain, hands clasped together. Tommy can see something attached to a golden chain dangling from his clenched hands, as though he's concealing something between them. He almost instinctively wants to pull his sword from behind his back before remembering he's not *one of them* anymore. "I wanted to poke at the very chance of some sort of peace being established in Manberg between heroes and villains. I know what the consequences could be, but I have already told you I'm prepared if anything is to go wrong."

"So... this is what, just an experiment, then?" Captain asks, sounding slightly appalled. "A test?"

"Something like that," Bad responds nonchalantly, before turning back to face the crowd, expression remaining the same, "Anyways, I just wanted to make that simple announcement. Nothing big, really. You can all return to your festivities now, I'm sure you're all excited to talk with one another."

Tommy resists the urge to grimace, recoiling a little. Bad had to be joking, right?

"When the real banquet begins, I'll call everyone's attention again," Bad continues with a slight hum, before beaming kindly, although it feels strangely ingenuine, unlike the many times Bad had smiled at Tommy while handing him a free muffin. "Thank you for your time!"

Tommy digs his nails into his palms, biting back a question that he wishes he could ask. He doesn't have the time to pick apart that entire speech, no matter how much he wants to— much less with *Quackity*, who seemed to be on Bad's side, even with how odd he was acting.

Everyone turns back to one another, conversing as though nothing had happened, but Tommy can tell that something has definitely shifted in the audience. Everyone's a lot more... tense. As if waiting for something to happen. Tommy can't help but feel the same way (even as he

already has a good idea of what is to be the outcome of tonight's "encore", as Quackity described it with a sinister grin).

"What's your plan, then?" Quackity asks suddenly, interrupting Tommy's train of thoughts, the boy all but flinching as he turns his attention back to the man.

"I-- what?" Tommy blinks rapidly. "Oh, uh-- I don't know. Probably just... stick by you until it's over."

Quackity frowns. Even though the man's wearing a mask just like everyone else (except Bad, strangely enough), it wasn't difficult to read his facial expressions.

"You're not going to talk to anyone? Really?" Quackity questions, and Tommy for some reason almost feels guilty. He swallows the emotion, clearing his throat.

*Don't let him get to your head, he reminds himself. Soon, he'll be gone, and so will everyone else that tried to make your life hell.*

"Why would I?" Tommy murmurs, tapping the tip of his shoe against the marble flooring, "I mean-- most of the heroes would recognize me immediately. It's hard not to, I mean, I-- I was-- you know."

Quackity softens gradually, nodding a little as he rubs Tommy's shoulder consolingly.

"I know," he promises, voice lowered the way he'd always speak to Tommy back when it was just the two of them in that dumb little apartment, "I won't let any of them hurt you, alright? I won't let Morpheus even look at you."

Tommy smiles mournfully, "He's going to, anyways, isn't he? I mean, it's my fate."

Quackity hums slowly, almost dangerously, "That's true, I suppose. The idea of you coming here was to aid you invoking your revenge, however... he doesn't have to see you. Not until then."

"... Thanks," Tommy mumbles, leaning a bit towards Quackity, who just grins widely.

"Anything for you."

Tommy isn't sure how true that statement is.

-----

Sam stares at himself in the mirror.

He's dressed himself up in an emerald green suit, deep enough to look almost forest green- his hair's been slicked back and his mask is held loosely in his hands.

Should he go through with this, really?

He hasn't been able to properly think this over.

It's only been a week or so since Ranboo had invited him to-- whatever the hell this was. Bad's "peaceful banquet", or whatever the hybrid had called it.

It was strange enough that Bad hadn't invited Sam himself, instead electing a random vigilante to do his work for him. Sam and Bad had been great friends back when Sam was still the "Warden"-- back when Sam still strived to make Manberg a "better place" (even as he simultaneously knew, deep down, that it was practically impossible. Manberg was a ruined city the day that they elected Schlatt as their president).

Sam turns in the mirror a bit, examining the golden cuffs on his wrists, the way that his face looks dark in the mirror-- the way that the gas mask he used to wear constantly back in the day still smells of ash.

He has to go, though.

For Bad, for Ranboo-- for whatever seemed to be planned out for this supposed "banquet".

He just wishes that he had gotten to say one last goodbye to Tommy before tonight.

(He can only hope the kid's safe at home, tucked away in bed, or maybe even hanging out with one of his friends).

(He can only hope).

-----

Techno's uncomfortable.

This isn't abnormal; he usually hates coming to these sorts of "parties" or gatherings, if you will.

But it almost feels like there's something itching at him, telling him that there's just something that isn't right about the way everyone moves so fluidly around him, as though not recognizing who else is in the same room with them (every now and again, he sees a few heads turn to gawk at him, before whispering with one another, but that's about it).

When Bad finally makes his appearance, putting on what can only be described as a whole dramatic entrance, hands spread out wide and the only person that doesn't appear to be wearing a mask, Techno almost takes his hidden knife out right there and prepares for a fight.

Something's off-- even with the way Wilbur keeps glancing his way from where he's positioned himself, arms crossed and leaning against the wall ("like a sulking emo kid at a party," Techno imagines Tommy would say if he were here right now).

Phil isn't oblivious to the notion, either.

He stands poised, wings drawn behind him but twitching every so often, talking quietly with a couple others that Techno recognizes, a wine glass gripped in his hand but never drained.

There's a lot of people here that Techno finds he can't quite place-- from the strangely dressed man in gold and emerald green clothes that's wearing a quite obvious hybrid concealer around his neck, to the strange guy that strikes a bit of familiarity with the way he walks, as though he believes everything can be his with a simple show of money.

He glances around the ballroom once more, eyes scanning for Morpheus, who he would've expected to make the most dramatic of entrances, but there's no sign of him. Just one of his friends is still speaking with Cosmos on the other side of the room, hand producing a bit of flame.

"Blade!" A voice calls enthusiastically, and the man turns, shoulders easing when he comes face to face with Tubbo, who is bouncing on the heels of his feet, dressed in a black and gold suit, hand clutching onto his teammate's.

"Hi, Bumble," Techno draws, eyes flitting towards Ranboo, who seems a bit more focused than usual, eyes scanning the crowd, posture sunken. "And Particle."

Ranboo turns, as if being addressed for the first time that night, and gives Techno a vague smile, "Hi, Blade."

"Everything alright?" Techno hums, looking back at Bumble, who is eagerly trying to bounce on his feet to get a better look at the dispersed crowd, who almost all seem to be taller than him.

"Fine, fine," Ranboo reassures, although his tone gives them away, and Techno raises an eyebrow questioningly. "I- uhm, I'll tell you about it later, alright?"

Techno exhales, dropping it for the moment. They really shouldn't speak about that sort of stuff in such a public area, anyways.

The double doors at the front of the ballroom open again, and Techno turns his head, almost as though expecting Morpheus to come striding inside, when instead he-- wait.

Techno frowns.

He knows that guy, doesn't he?

Some old hero that didn't really count as a "hero" anymore after he'd quit or something ages ago, right around that old sidekick of Morpheus' death. Right?

Techno couldn't quite remember his name, but with one side-eyed glance in Phil's direction, he could gather he was right; the man's stature was now incredibly stiff, wings flared as he watched the mysterious, supposedly ex-hero walk through the doors, straightening the front of his jacket.

Almost immediately, as the ballroom grows quiet at the new arrival of a guest, the hero section of the ballroom erupts into excitement, converging on the supposed ex-hero, who immediately becomes overwhelmed, backing away.

Even Ranboo of all people, who had looked so incredibly nervous at being here, seems to relax at the sight of the estranged hero.

Before Techno can even ask any questions, Tubbo gasps and pipes up, "Is that the Warden?"

Ranboo hums in response, sounding relieved strangely, "Yeah-- yeah. Yep. He's back, I guess."

"Holy shit," Tubbo breathes, eyes wide, hand playing with the gold plaited ring on his finger, "That's so cool, I thought he quit like, months ago!"

"Guess he's back for one last show," Ranboo says, strangely ominous, and Techno frowns.

"One last show?" Techno repeats.

"Yeah-- for the peace banquet," Ranboo responds, which really doesn't give Techno much of an answer, "He was good friends with Bad, I heard."

"Hmm," Techno hums, turning to watch curiously as the hero -- Warden, apparently -- makes his way through the crowd, hand on the back of his neck as some supposedly old friends of the hero's slap his back encouragingly. "Interesting."

-----

Tommy might faint.

This might be it.

He's seeing the light.

There's no way in fucking hell that Quackity-- or-- or Bad, or whatever-- invited the fucking Warden of all goddamn people.

This had to be a joke.

"Is this a joke?" He breathes out, turning to Quackity, something close to excitement and overwhelming dread pooling in his stomach all at once. On one hand, he was incredibly fond of the former hero-- the Warden was one of the only heroes that actually had cared for him and tried to intervene between Morpheus' actions (he was also the only one who decided that the hero life was enough for him and actually quit, supposedly to never be seen again until today). "Is that-- that's seriously the fucking *Warden*?"

"In the flesh," Quackity responds, grinning wildly and patting Tommy gently on the back, "Why? Want an autograph?"

Tommy flushes, "No-- nope. Definitely not. Fuck off."

"You don't? I was gonna go ask--"

"Die, actually," Tommy interjects sweetly, earning a giggle from Quackity.

"Fine, fine," Quackity holds his hands up in surrender, the devious grin still plastered on his face, "Well, either way, I'm going to go talk to him."

Tommy just huffs, flushing and turning the other way. Of course Quackity was able to talk to the fucking Warden, the actual prick.

"So, are you absolutely *positive* that you don't want a—"

"Fuck off."

"Okay, okay," Quackity snickers again, backing away from Tommy and in the direction of the Warden.



Tommy lingers a bit behind, shoulders uncoiling as he watches the man converse with the man. It's difficult to tell the expression that the Warden wears underneath the gas mask, but from years of dealing with Morpheus— Tommy has a good feeling that the guy's uncomfortable.

It's only expected from him, really. He was right back in the middle of the whole "hero and villains" shit with nowhere to turn and people crowding around him, practically suffocating him in their desperate attempts to converse with one of the best heroes Manberg had ever seen.

Tommy turns his head, suddenly agitated, arms crossing insecurely over his chest. He shouldn't focus too much on the Warden— he was only here for one person, after all, and they still hadn't made an appearance.

Oh, well.

After a long pause of watching Quackity enthusiastically speak with the former hero, Tommy turns on his heel and heads towards the punch bowl, secretly hoping that some idiot spiked it.

A hybrid stands behind the refreshments table, dressed elegantly in a red vest and matching tie, cat ears flicking in every direction but eyes focused on Tommy as he comes into view.

"What can I get you?" the hybrid asks and Tommy exhales, dragging a hand down the side of his face, wishing that he didn't have to wear this stupid beanie and could ruffle his own hair. It was a nervous habit that he still hadn't gotten over.

"Just some punch or something," Tommy murmurs in response, poking the tablecloth, relishing in the way the texture feels. It's always calmed him a tad to feel the different textures of things, from freshly polished wood to soft wool.

(He silently wishes he could've just worn one of his jumpers here tonight instead of this sweaty ass suit).

While he waits for his punch, he stands, staring at the other various refreshments on the table, his stomach knotting at the large red velvet cake positioned in the center. Sweets weren't really ever his thing; Dream always thought he got too energetic on them (which was kind of true).

Tommy's only ever really liked Jaffa Cakes— he's had a variety of other sweet things before, though, like doughnuts and chocolate, but he remembers red velvet cake all too well.

Back when Hannah still worked at the Hero Complex — the beloved Thorns, a hero with the power to produce flowers and thorns against her opponents — she had made a red velvet cake topped with delicate little red flowers and butterflies for Tommy's birthday.

(Dream had accidentally dropped it while bringing it out of the kitchen and Tommy didn't get to eat but a small piece since Dream was "afraid he'd get sick"— either way, Tommy still appreciates the action in the long run).

He smiles sadly at the cake, at the elegance of the frosting around the middle, a bittersweet taste in his mouth.

Tommy turns, making up his mind, but before he can call the cat hybrid back over, something — or *someone*, rather — bumps roughly into his shoulder. He yelps, swinging around with full intent to deck someone, until he sees who is standing there.

"Oh— shit," The Bard sucks air in through their teeth, looking down curiously at Tommy, their head tilting as though examining their prey, "Sorry about that."

Tommy's heart drops.

Fuck.

Oh, fuck.

That— fuck. That’s the guy— oh, hell.

“It’s fine,” Tommy squeaks out, glad for the voice changing modulator that Purpled had helped Quackity install on the side of his throat, “It’s— it’s fine.”

The Bard hums, nervously scratching the back of their neck, “Do uh... have I seen you before?”

“Aha, no, nope,” Tommy responds, much too quickly lifting his gloved hands up. His heart rate is traveling what feels like a million miles per minute. Could this get any fucking worse? Really, what more could be worse than the very asshole that’s still hunting him down to be in the same place as him?

He already knew that the Syndicate was coming, so why is it such a shock now that the Bard is standing *right there* in front of him, eyes cold and calculating, looking down at him from a height that shouldn’t be legal.

(Not to mention the mysterious hybrid traits the guy had— nobody fucking knew what he was and Tommy was not really as curious to find out as he once was).

“Really? You’re not, like, a vigilante or something?” The Bard asks now.

“Uh, well—” Tommy begins, trying to formulate a potential cover story that won’t end up with him being murdered before Morpheus even arrives, when he’s interrupted by the hybrid nudging his arm.

“Your drink,” the cat hybrid says politely, handing him the cup, and Tommy exhales in relief. Whoever this pussy is, they saved his life. He is forever indebted to them.

“Thanks, puss boy— or girl— or— fuck,” Tommy stammers to the hybrid, quickly turning around and clutching the drink in shaky hands. He’s really beginning to lose it.

To his surprise, the Bard snorts, shoving a gloved hand over their mouth. Tommy’s heart drops again.

“Really? ‘Puss boy’?” The Bard says, and Tommy resists the urge to curse this fucker out. Sure, they’re trying to kill him, and *sure*, they’re part of a highly bloodthirsty and vindictive trio of villains, but...

Tommy has zero self preservation skills.

“Fuck off,” he grumbles to the villain without even thinking and the Bard hums in a dangerous kind of amusement.

Tommy decides that this is his signal to get the fuck away from them before he dies once again prior to when he should.

(For the second time this year, too).

Skirting around the refreshments table, Tommy keeps his distance from the Bard, whose eyes remain on him, as if curious— he swallows thickly. For what has to be the tenth time tonight, he is heavily rethinking his decision to have shown up at this banquet.

---

Tommy’s been claustrophobic since he can remember. The worst episode he’s had to document the severities of the phobia was once when he and Dream were training— a part of the seminar was to see who could successfully escape from a box thrown into a pool of water.

Plenty of heroes were able to complete it but Tommy just couldn't get it— he always began to freak out as soon as he was in the box and freeze up, unable to do much but stare as the box began to fill with water.

It was horrible. There were countless times where he nearly drowned (and would have) if he wasn't saved by someone.

Usually it was Arsonist or Hypnos who would drag him out of the water, spluttering and coughing, trying to tune out the sounds of yelling as Sapnap tried to bargain with Dream about the absurdity of forcing a thirteen year old kid to do high-intensity hero training.

Dream used to go on and on about how they should just “leave Tommy in there” until he eventually broke free on his own— everyone usually disagreed.

(Sapnap specifically would always argue that Tommy would literally *drown* if they did that, and that shut Dream up for a while).

That's how Tommy feels now, standing in the middle of the crowded ballroom, staring at the doorway. He shouldn't feel this way again— shouldn't feel this inhuman fear as he looks at the familiar smiley-face, the lime green formulated suit representing what makes up the manufactured, trademarked hero of *Morpheus* altogether.

But he can't help it.

He almost feels like he's back there again, and everything's cold, from the tips of his fingertips all the way into the depths of his bones. This was the reason that he came tonight, though— to see that fucker and watch him and every other person that made his life a living hell he destroyed.

(But did he want that? He wasn't so sure what he wanted— sure, Morpheus needed to be knocked down a couple thousand pegs, but did he really deserve to die? Did anyone in this room deserve to die besides him, even though technically he's already dead?)

Tommy backs away from the door once he finds the ability to control his limbs again, eyes wide as though he's a deer in headlights, watching the speeding car coming right at him as Morpheus moves fluidly through the ballroom, almost immediately being surrounded by only other heroes offering praise.

(Tommy notices, bitterly, that most of the people shaking his hand, offering their thanks for his "service to Manberg", are the ones he remembers spat on him back in the Complex, who watched as he "died").

There's a saying that Tommy knows all too well— the topic of the three different fear responses.

Ranboo was either fawn or flight; Tommy could tell just by looking at them. They could hold their ground, but would probably freeze up in the face of something dangerous. Tommy could remember a time when the guy nearly got hit by a car in the lot right outside of a market and Tommy had to practically tackle them out of the way.

Tubbo, on the other hand, was fight. Anyone who knew the kid was aware of this fact— hell, Tommy was almost convinced that if Tubbo told him one day that he was a black belt in karate that Tommy would one-hundred percent believe him.

Tommy, personally, believed himself to be fight; he knew deep down that he was all three, though.

In the face of danger, Tommy shined bright; he had fought and trained for years to be the perfect hero, the perfect fighter.

However, there were times where his bones would dissolve and his muscles would turn into putty in the face of opportunities that made him so sickeningly terrified that he couldn't move.

This, unfortunately, happened to be one of those times.

So Tommy does the only thing he could possibly think of in this situation.

He runs.

---

Tubbo has been eyeing the refreshments table all evening.

They've got an array of brownies, sweets, and even fucking packaged Jaffa Cakes, of all things, which makes him snort.

"Do you think we should stuff some of those into our pockets and bring them to Tommy, boss man?" Tubbo asks, tugging on Ranboo's hand, who raises his eyebrows.

"Do- do you even have pockets, Bee?" Ranboo questions, frowning at Tubbo's yellow and black suit.

"Mm, no, but *you* do," Tubbo responds, grinning sharply at Ranboo, who deflates.

He probably should've expected this one, really.

"I'm not putting Jaffa Cakes in my pockets," they say, tone probably highlighting how tired he is.

The two of them had only been at this party for about twenty minutes and he already wanted to leave— whether it was because of how many people there were or how tense the air felt, they couldn't be sure. The only slight source of comfort they had was Tubbo clinging onto their hand and The Warden standing on the other side of the room.

(And Techno, too, Ranboo supposed. He was alright. They weren't much of a fan of Wilbur, though, no matter how highly Tommy would talk about him. All they knew him as was the ruthless Bard).

"Aww, come on," Tubbo complains, frowning up at Ranboo, "Put some in there."

"Dude, they will literally melt in my pockets."

Tubbo scoffs, "They're in packages, boss man. You'll be fine."

"Tubbo, I am not putting Jaffa Cakes in my pockets, even if they are packaged," Ranboo hisses.

"Not even if it's for Tommy?"

Ranboo's eyes narrow.

"Don't pull that on me," they grumble.

"Pull what on you?" Tubbo grins, feigning innocence.

"The— the '*What if it's for Tommy?*' crap."

"I did no such thing."

"You're the ones that are always clinging to each other," Ranboo accuses.



“You’re the only one who he lets dye his hair,” Tubbo rebuttals smoothly.

Ranboo pauses and exhales.

They’ve been backed into a bit of a corner here, really.

“Fine, just—” They go to respond, when an immense amount of cheer occurs behind him, interrupting his sentence.

He turns, frowning at what they could possibly be cheering about, and—

Oh.

Standing in all of his prestigious, lime green and blank faced glory, is the number one ranked hero of all of Manberg— someone that Ranboo had known already would show up at some point.

Morpheus.

The very thought of the guy makes his mouth feel dry.

Ranboo clicks his jaw shut and quickly glances across the room at Warden— no— Sam, who has already begun to stand up from one of the tables on the outskirts of the ballroom.

Warden glances their way and they both share a look; even though Ranboo can’t quite read his facial expression behind the gas mask, he can picture what the man’s trying to say.

*Leave.*

Without another thought, Ranboo turns on their heel, squeezing Tubbo's hand as he beelines for the bathroom that they'd bookmarked the second they had walked into the banquet (which was definitely normal, right? Making sure you knew exactly where the bathroom was in case of a breakdown).

"What? What is it?" Tubbo says frantically as Ranboo pulls him along through the crowd, the taller's pace quickening as the shouts of praise and acclaim begin to quiet down for Morpheus, the number one hero. "What's going on?"

"Morpheus," Ranboo responds breathlessly once they reach the hallway that's labeled Bathrooms. "He's finally made his appearance."

Ranboo turns down the hallway, ignoring the way it smells of an old hotel — flowery perfume and the scent of death, he'd found.

Tubbo purses his lips into a line, expression stony, "So, what, are we just hiding, or something? Like little bitches?"

Ranboo grimaces, pausing in front of the boy's restroom (it's the same feat each time, wishing there was just a gender neutral bathroom, but there is really no time to think about it).

"We're not hiding, exactly," Ranboo tries, reaching out to pull the bathroom door open, "Escaping, though? Uhm, possibly."

"Escaping what—?" Tubbo begins, before pausing at the echoing sound of someone sobbing in the bathroom.

The two exchange a frown, conversation quickly quieting at the sound of someone — and why does it sound so *familiar*? — crying.

Ranboo freezes in place, looking down at Tubbo with a strange expression, completely unsure of what to do. Neither of them had their power suppressors on, which made it distinctly more difficult for Ranboo specifically to deal with someone who was crying. It burned like hell if water dropped onto his skin like this.

“Hello?” Tubbo calls, taking the first step and letting go of Ranboo’s hand. He cautiously walks further into the restroom. The stalls are all wide open at first glance, as if nobody’s actually there. “Is someone in here?”

Tubbo continues to walk down the bathroom hall, glancing into the open bathroom stalls with a frown.

He continues before coming to a full stop, the colour draining from his face when he reaches the corner at the end of the bathroom, separating the last stall from the wall. It’s usually a place for a janitor of sorts to put their mop and bucket while cleaning.

Ranboo swallows thickly, fidgeting and beginning to take a couple, cautious steps forwards. He’s afraid, not because he knows what’s there, but because for once in a very long time, Tubbo looks truly and utterly *terrified*.

Before he can ask what it is or even take another step, Tubbo lets out a choked, “*Tommy?*”

## Chapter End Notes

me: so tommy, ur going to a banquet where most (if not all) villains r gonna be

tommy: aha, yep

me: so, it would make sense if the syndicate is gonna be there, since they r one of the largest villain groups.

tommy: makes sense to me

me: right, so, the bard is gonna be there—

tommy: what.

haha hey guys, he's in a funny goofy mood & i'm still sick btw which rilly sucks but hi  
<3 beloveds /p

author drabble (DSMP LORE SPOILERS!!);

-everyone in this fic is morally gray; none of them are black or white. except maybe butterflies!dream; he's actually insane, just like in canon! /srs (c!dream AND butterflies!dream apologists dni)

-shout out to the reader that called the dee team the deez nuts team like ten chapters ago, i forget ur name but i adore u <3 ))

-lore got me Fucked up right now. i miss c!charlie my shining star. so much. also holy fucking shit? What the Fuck. oh my fucking god. i'm so upset i'm actually gonna Be Sick , c!tommy get behind me rn. Someone Please talk to me about the lore today i'm losing it /nf

## “take a breath.” — part III.

### Chapter Summary

Tommy’s fingernails dig into his hair, into the back of his neck, and he truly realizes that he can barely breathe. He’s drowning out of water, he’s falling again, and it’s only a matter of time until he inevitably hits the ground.

Is this how it ends for him?

Is this the way he had wanted to die— alone in the bathroom, mourning the destruction of the world, of the people he’d wanted to see go up in flames for as long as he could remember?

or, tommy has a Very massive mental breakdown in the bathroom, benchtrio content (mostly alliumduo this time), & uhm, lots of pain actually ! enjoy :)

### Chapter Notes

this is a **very heavy chapter**, everyone. please read the trigger warnings and proceed with caution, ily /p <3

**tw:** derealization, depersonalization/out of body experience(?), self loathing, suicidal thoughts & ideation, talk of major character death/implied major character death, gaslighting/manipulation/severe guilt tripping, child abuse. this is a **very** heavy chapter guys, please stay safe & let me know if i forget any<3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Dream, look!”*

*Tommy grins widely from where he stands on his tiptoes atop the tower, holding up his cupped hands like a prize, "I caught a butterfly!"*

*Dream hums, barely turning his head up from his phone to look at Tommy, "You caught a butterfly?"*

*"I did! It's so beautiful, look, look! Have you ever seen a blue butterfly before?" Tommy shouts brightly, walking up to Dream and holding up his cupped hands proudly, much like a child presenting a horrid drawing to their parents would.*

*"It's blue?" Dream repeats, blinking and delicately touching Tommy's hands, huffing when the kid nods fervently. "Alright, kid, let's see it, then."*

*Tommy slowly uncups his hands, making sure that it's not enough for his new friend to escape, "See? See it, Dream? Isn't she beautiful?"*

*Dream leans close, before rolling his eyes and snorting, "That's a moth."*

*"No, no, it's a butterfly, you asshole!"*

*"Theseus, that is a moth," Dream deadpans.*

*Tommy makes a face, almost like a pout, "No, it's a beautiful butterfly and I love it. It's my new best friend."*

*"You can't have a moth as a best friend."*

*"Yes, I can, and it's not a fuckin' moth!"*

*Dream exhales, turning fully away from the boy.*

*“You know, Theseus, I thought we were best friends.”*

*Tommy’s face crumples a little, “What? Of course we are, Dream. We are best friends!”*

*“Prove it.”*

*“How...?”*

*Dream raises his eyebrows, “Crush the moth.”*

*Tommy recoils, as though he’d been slapped in the face, “I... what?”*

*“You heard me. Crush it.”*

*Tommy blinks a little, “I- I can’t crush it, Dream, that’s- that’s just cruel.”*

*Dream shrugs, ever so nonchalant, “I guess we aren’t best friends, then.”*

*“No, no, we are! We are!”*

*“But you’re not crushing the moth for me. What kind of best friend does that make you?”*

*Tommy’s face falls and he closes his hands a little more, putting them behind his back.*

*“Sorry, Dream.”*

*Dream hums but doesn't respond, “We should go inside. Warden wants to train with you again.”*

*Tommy's face lights up immediately, his emotions going a 180, “Seriously?! He does?”*

*“Mhm.”*

*Tommy's smile fades a little and he glances behind himself, looking at the sun beginning to set, “I- uhm. I'll be just a minute, then. Gonna watch the sunset.”*

*Dream snorts, “The sunset? Seriously?”*

*“Yes, seriously. Now fuck off!”*

*“Fine, fine. Hurry up, though. I doubt Warden would like waiting for you.”*

*As soon as Dream's gone, Tommy exhales in relief and pulls his hands in front of him, opening them and smiling as the little butterfly flaps its wings.*

*“Don't worry, little guy,” he murmurs gently, “I won't let anyone hurt you. I swear it.”*

---

Tommy stares at himself in the bathroom mirror, the feeling of the granite sink digging into his palms. He's long since torn the mask off his face and the beanie from his hair, both strewn on the floor, forgotten.



He'd probably be in deep shit if someone walked in right now — hell, he'd be dead if the Bard of all people walked in right now — but he couldn't find it in him to care.

He stares into the mirror and finds someone unrecognizable. He knows it's him— those are *his* eyes staring back at him, *his* hair that looks sweaty and matted from being stuffed underneath a beanie, *his* hands clutching the sides of the sink.

And yet it doesn't feel like him.

He doesn't look like himself, not anymore— he doesn't know what it was but everything about him, from the way his eyes appeared dim and the way his face morphed and became nothing but a blank slate... he wasn't Tommy anymore.

Better yet, he wasn't *Theseus* anymore, but that much had been true since his supposed death.

Tonight, he was Icarus; the boy strewn from the sky, encased in flames, reborn like a phoenix.

(He didn't feel like he was, though).

(He was just Tommy).

He flexes his fingers from the sink, lowering his head so that his matted, sweaty curls fall into his eyes. It's a strange creature comfort, for the red tips being the only thing holding him together, the feeling of the cold granite to the sink pressing far into the pads of his fingertips.

(It's a promise that he's at least a little different than who he once was, even if he doesn't think so).

There's a ringing in his ears, and he shoves the sink, moving backwards and tucking himself away into the far corner of the bathroom, hiding in the only place he knows Quackity wouldn't check, knees pulled to his chest and arms over his head.

He can't feel himself breathing, can't hear anything except for the ringing in his ears and the sharp, horrible feeling of how dry his throat is.

There's something hot stinging his cheeks and he wants to scream, to choke out every last thing that he's wanted to say to the people in the next room over, to the world, to the universe; but instead he curls into a ball, huddling against the wall in attempt to feel small.

To feel compact, to feel safe, to feel protected, even if the thumbs that run carefully over the rough texture of his sleeves is his own. A self-soothing technique he'd long since grown accustomed to— there was really nobody else but him.

He was alone, and it was better that way.

(If he was by himself, there was no one else that he could harm— no one else that could potentially be hurt by his own doing).

Tommy's fingernails dig into his hair, into the back of his neck, and he truly realizes that he can barely breathe. He's drowning out of water, he's falling again, and it's only a matter of time until he inevitably hits the ground.

Is this how it ends for him?

Is this the way he had wanted to die— alone in the bathroom, mourning the destruction of the world, of the people he'd wanted to see go up in flames for as long as he could remember?

It only feels ever so anticlimactic; he had said that his death as Theseus, falling from the tallest building in Manberg, was the worst way that he could possibly die... but isn't *this* the most horrible way?

He didn't even get to say goodbye to Sam, or Phil, or Tubbo...

Maybe he's selfish.

Maybe everything he's done has led him up to this point— his inevitable death— for a reason.

Destiny existed, he always knew that the ideas of 'luck' and 'karma' were real; he also knew that, if they were gods, they always seemed to hate *him* specifically.

His fortune never lasted, never.

As a child, he had expected himself to grow up and do great things; to become this big hero that everyone looked up to, that little kids would watch with stars in their eyes, that people would adore.

(He wanted to help people, so desperately, but nobody seemed to ever want to help him).

He wonders how disappointed his younger self would be to find him here, huddled on the bathroom floor in a ballroom that plenty famous people were attending, having a breakdown over seeing someone he fully intended to kill the second he saw.

Someone he'd been planning revenge on for months (despite the strange feeling that maybe he should just *let it go*, even though he was certain they'd come for him someday).

If his younger self saw him here, losing it over the inability to recognize the person in the mirror... they'd probably laugh.

(Laugh at the person he once was, laugh at the person he is now, even though he doesn't feel any better than he did when he was in the Complex).

He feels...

He feels *selfish*.

The word repeats in his head, a constant, like a prayer, almost.

He's selfish.

The one thing he never wanted to be was Morpheus' counterimage— sure, the hero had been his idol for quite some time, but he wanted to be himself, too.

He didn't want to be Morpheus 2.0, he wanted to be *Theseus*.

Known for his own fights, for his own heroic actions. He didn't want to piggyback off of Morpheus' achievements forever, to have all of his *own* achievements be under the umbrella that made them seem like they were the greater hero's instead.

Morpheus was selfish.

He was cruel, but he was Tommy's friend for a long time.

(Tommy would rather die than be anything like him).

It almost feels like there's static in his ears, the noise falling from them in one fail swoop; he's almost afraid that he might have lost his hearing, until someone's grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him profusely, as if frightened.

The tips of their fingers dig into his shoulder blades and they almost feel like they're biting him. He almost expects the hissing sound of steel swiping through the air to signify by his ear, but nothing comes.

Tommy looks up, fear settling at the pit of his stomach, tears blurring his vision until he sees the expression of his friend— of *Tubbo*, staring right back at him, mouth agape in horror, and he fears he may be dreaming.

The boy's mouth is moving but no sound is coming out, and Tommy chokes on something again— how long has he been crying?— and his friend's face crumples, head turning to look at someone.

Tommy curls further into himself as another person comes into view, pulling off their mask to reveal a horrified...

His heart sinks and now he's truly wondering if this is a nightmare, because standing right there behind Tubbo is Ranboo, but they aren't themselves. Little purple particles bounce around them and their eyes, multicoloured, are wide and staring right at him.

They're an Enderman hybrid, and Tommy lets out a shaky exhale as he takes it all in, dipping his head between his knees again and trying to ignore the way everything's begun to spin.

He squeezes his eyes shut, letting tears slip loose down his cheeks, and something pops in his ear.

“—ommy, Big T, can you hear me?” Tubbo's frantic voice cuts in and Tommy's never felt so happy and afraid to hear his best friend's voice, “Tommy, please talk to me, please, I'm here, Ranboo's here too, just— talk to us?”

Tubbo lets out a short cry, and Tommy's heart recoils.

“Tommy, *please*, ” the boy pleads, hands digging into Tommy’s shoulder blades in a desperate attempt to drag him out of his own head, “Please, fucking— please say something.”

Tommy breathes, taking in one of those incredibly long breaths that shake and quiver, almost as though you’re whimpering against the clog in your throat signaling another sob, and he coughs.

He opens his eyes again, warily, sniffing and looking at Tubbo, whose shoulders seem to loosen a little at seeing his best friend’s eyes once more.

“Tubbo?” Tommy whispers, voice hoarse, blinking away tears. He still hasn’t fully convinced himself this is reality— it feels like a dream, something otherworldly, and he hopes that this is all a dumb nightmare that he’ll wake up from.

That he’s back home— or fuck it, at *Wilbur’s* house— curled up and asleep, warm and safe.

(Maybe if he tries hard enough, he can close his eyes and pretend he’s back to the way things used to be— that Sam is ruffling his hair with flour stained hands, that Wilbur is cupping his face and snickering when Tommy smacks him, that Karl’s giving him that cheeky half-moon grin while rambling about time travel).

Reality comes crashing back down on him seconds later and he lets out a choked sob, registering Tubbo’s crestfallen expression in front of him.

The boy looks like every other person in the ballroom— he’s wearing a suit, something that suits him, but his mask has been discarded, crumpled on the floor beside Tommy’s own. His eyes shine with something that Tommy’s only seen a few times— pure fear.

He almost gags at the sight.

Tubbo never showed fear. He was always the one to be brave, always the bigger man (no matter how much Tommy had convinced himself that he was the big man, it was always

Tubbo. If they were heroes, *Tommy* would be Tubbo's sidekick, surely).

"Hi, Tommy," Tubbo whispers, voice breaking, relief etching a pretty painting on his face even as it wrinkles in areas at the sight of his best friend huddled on the floor.

Cold seeps into Tommy, through his shirt that's just a little too loose, his back wrapped in plasters, his hair matted with sweat. He feels as though he's been pushed underneath cold water, like he's taking a bath again as a child and someone's shoved his whole head under.

He can't quite understand where he is— everything seems fake, and the walls almost appear to be moving.

And—

Tubbo's here and Ranboo's stood just behind him, eyes wide in the same twin light of fear.

Both of his best friends are here, where he was almost certain was only a ballroom full of vigilantes and... whom the fuck ever.

He was just dreaming, surely.

"Where... am I?" Tommy whispers, because it's the first question he can think of, other than the ones that burn his throat. The ones he'd rather not acknowledge, no matter how inevitable it is.

Tubbo exchanges a glance with Ranboo— who has been relatively silent this whole time, still in shock that Tommy's here— and clears his throat.

"You're— uhm," Tubbo stammers a bit, hands squeezing Tommy's shoulders a little, "You really don't know?"

Tommy blinks a little, and horror sets in, his voice coming out in a little squeak, “I’m in a nightmare. Right? This is all— it’s a nightmare.”

“Tommy, you’re— you’re not dreaming,” Ranboo speaks up suddenly, and their voice sounds like it’s a million miles away.

Tommy drops his head, gasping a little, “Don’t say that. This isn’t real, I’m not here, *you’re not here.*”

“Do you— do you even know where ‘here’ is?” Ranboo mutters, bending down beside Tubbo, scanning Tommy’s face carefully.

Tommy coughs, hands tangling into his curls, eyes red-rimmed. He doesn’t respond.

“Tommy,” Tubbo begins, sounding a little choked, “Why are you here?”

The boy recoils, as if punched in the face, turning his head.

“Tommy,” Ranboo says, his tone bordering on pleading, “Please talk to us— we’re your friends. You can tell us anything.”

“I have to be here,” Tommy responds in a quiet voice, not looking up.

“Why?”

“It’s my- my destiny,” he mumbles, shoulders curling forwards, as if trying to shield himself from everything— everyone.



“Your *destiny*? What the fuck are you talking about?” Tubbo whispers, voice lilting.  
“Tommy, you’re— you’re in a fucking place filled with— with villains and shit! How is it your fucking ‘destiny’ to be here?”

“Don’t you get it?” Tommy looks up, eyes dull and nearly glazed over, “I have to be the one to destroy them. It has to be *me*. It’s always been my destiny— my— my *legacy*, if you will. I need my happy ending, I *need* it. It has to be me.”

Tubbo blinks rapidly, trying to shoot Ranboo another strange look, but the hybrid’s face has fallen, eyes wide as if realizing something.

Tommy’s entire body is shaking all over, from head to toe, as though he’s experiencing some adrenaline rush, when really it just feels like he’s going to drop from a sugar high. It’s a horrible, indescribable feeling, and he almost wants to just drop on his side and let himself fall apart entirely.

(To fall asleep, to not wake up).

“Tommy...” Ranboo begins, now tilting forwards, his tone bordering on suspicion, but leaning more towards a concern Tommy isn’t sure he deserves. “I... are you one of them?”

It sounds more like a statement than a question, as though they already know the answer, and Tubbo frowns a little, feeling out of the loop.

Tommy looks down again, face twisted into pure disgust. His fingers dig into his vest, still shaking physically, despite Tubbo’s best attempts to try and stabilize him.

“It’s none of your fucking business,” Tommy bites.

“Wait— you are?” Tubbo says now, snapping his head in his friend’s direction. He isn’t sure if he should feel hurt or not because, then again, *he* was a vigilante, too, and he hadn’t told Tommy about that either.

“No, I’m not fucking *one of them*,” Tommy says angrily, tone dripping with something malicious, “I would *never* be one of them. They’re— they’re horrible. I hate them.”

“You’re not,” Ranboo says, slowly, staring at Tommy, “But you were, maybe?”

Tommy glowers at the hybrid but doesn’t disagree, snapping his gaze back to the floor and coiling his hands through his hair again, sniffing.

“Tubbo, watch the door, make sure nobody comes in,” Ranboo whispers, reaching out to gently tug on his husband’s shoulder, eyes sympathetic.

“But Tommy—”

“I can take care of it,” Ranboo reassures, sending Tubbo a small smile. “Tell anyone who wants to come in that there’s been an accident or something.”

Tubbo hesitates before nodding slowly, letting go of Tommy’s shoulders and standing. He sends one last sad look in his friend’s direction before taking his place by the bathroom door, prepared but still listening.

Ranboo inches closer to his friend, eyes soft as he takes a look at Tommy, at the way the kid shuffles back (as though afraid of being touched), but also sways forward, like a magnet. Like he needs to be touched, but doesn’t want to let himself be held. To be taken care of.

Something painful curls in Ranboo’s chest and he swallows thickly, pushing it down for later. They could discuss it another time.

“Tommy,” Ranboo begins, tone gentle, hands hovering just above the boy’s arms but not quite touching, “What’s going on?”

Tommy sniffs a little again, looking up as if only just now realizing that Ranboo is sitting in front of him, “Why... why the fuck are you here?”

“In the bathroom?” Ranboo asks lightly, even though he knows what Tommy meant.

“No, dickhead, *here*,” Tommy seethes, waving his hands around for a moment before clutching his upper forearms again. He won’t make eye contact; Ranboo wouldn’t want him to, anyways.

“I was invited,” Ranboo murmurs after a pause, watching sadly as Tommy rubs a thumb over his own arm. Self soothing.

The boy’s eyes flicker up to him instantly, a sliver of recognition swirling in them.

(Ranboo wouldn’t admit that the resentment hidden behind it stings a little).

“You’re a...?”

“Vigilante,” Ranboo reassures, quickly, “I wouldn’t be a hero if you paid me money for it.”

Tommy grimaces a little, “Oh.”

Ranboo has to bite back the inching concern that Tommy’s reaction wasn’t a little more loud — the Tommy he knows would’ve probably said that he would do it for the money or something.

(The pinching thought that the Tommy he knew could be gone makes his stomach twist).

“Yeah, *oh*, ” Ranboo murmurs, clearing their throat, “Why don’t you tell me why you’re here, though? I didn’t really take you as a hero or villain person.”

It’s hard to believe, really— *Tommy*, the boy whose disgust of the heroes and villains of Manberg was so incredibly prominent, being one of them.

A mercenary, though... that was definitely possible.

“I already told you. It’s my- my destiny. Or as, uh, my friend Q—” Tommy clears his throat, “*Daedalus* would say... my legacy.”

Ranboo blinks, slowly, piecing it together.

He’s heard the name ‘Daedalus’ before, surely, but he can’t quite remember where.

“Uh— right, mhm, but what... does that mean, exactly?”

“It’s me that should destroy them,” Tommy hisses, tone sharp and Ranboo frowns, “It’s my destiny to do it- my- It has been since they gave me my name.”

“‘Destroy them’?” Ranboo repeats, drawing his eyebrows together. "Destroy who?"

“I—” Tommy freezes, coughing, face tipping forwards and hand flying to his chest, as if trying to peel the words from his throat. It grips his shirt and Ranboo's heart pangs with sympathy as he realizes that the kid in front of him-- this wasn't Tommy.

Not the Tommy he knew, the one that beamed every few sentences, with laughter that was contagious, who Wilbur would never shut up about... who even the incredibly apathetic *Warden* of all people seemed to wholeheartedly adore.

“Tommy— Tom, Tommy, man, breathe,” Ranboo says frantically, gently reaching out and taking Tommy by the arms, eyes full of worry when the boy meets his gaze, coughing and taking large inhales of breath. “That’s it, that’s it. Breathe with me, okay? It’s okay. Here-- feel me breathing, alright?”

He draws Tommy's hand to his own chest, placing it right over his heart, inhaling deeply and counting slowly in his head before releasing it in an exhale. It's a couple moments of breathing and soft reassurances that it's all okay (that Tubbo of all people would kill anyone who walked through that door without hesitation for Tommy) before the boy finally calms down.

He's not entirely better, but his breathing's slower, and he leans forwards when Ranboo lets go of his arms, instead opening his own-- a promise, an invite.

Tommy doesn't even hesitate, not as he normally would, before he's molding into his friend's grasp. He doesn't wrap his own arms around Ranboo, keeping them still around his torso, but Ranboo pulls him close, shooting Tubbo a pained glance over the boy's head.

There's silence for a while, of just the two of them breathing, of the distant sound of people bustling far away, until Tommy speaks again.

“I- I can’t tell you,” Tommy whispers, his voice like broken glass, “I can’t say his name. I can’t, I can't, I’m sorry. *I’m sorry.*”

“Hey, hey, don’t worry about it, alright? You don’t have to say his name,” Ranboo reassures gently, their mind already spinning about the possibility of who 'he' could be, “But could you tell me... what you mean by the whole 'destiny' thing? You said it was 'given' to you since you were granted your name or something.”

Tommy breathes a little, in and out, head tilted against Ranboo’s chest, before whispering, “Do you know Greek mythology, Ranboo?”

Ah.

Daedalus- the father of Icarus, the famous inventor.

That's where he knew it from.

One of the times Techno had visited him at the pet store with Wilbur-- who only wanted to look at Tubbo's collection of beehives-- the piglin had been going on about some Greek mythology to them (to be fair, he was genuinely interested in it).

Ranboo's hums, a little confused now, "Only a little bit. I- uh, a friend of mine likes to talk about it a lot."

The pause is far more prolonged this time.

"You mentioned a friend," Ranboo whispers, deciding to speak up this time, "One named 'Daedaleus'. Is, uhm... is that who you're referring to?"

Tommy snuffles a little, "Well, not- not quite."

"Do you wanna talk about it now...?" Ranboo glances at Tubbo again, the sound of the bathroom door opening and closing alerting him. Something's wrong, he can feel it, but he can't move now. Not when Tommy's like this.

He can wait.

They glance back down at Tommy, examining the bright red contrast between the tips of the boy's hair and the golden parts of the rest of it.

"No," Tommy chokes out, shaking his head a little, "I can't. Not- not now. I can't—"

"That's alright," they reassure, rubbing a hand awkwardly up and down Tommy's back in an attempt to be comforting, "You can tell me when you want, okay? I'll- Tubbo and I- we're here to listen. We're your best friends."

"Don't get all sappy on me now," Tommy whispers and Ranboo laughs lightly.

That was a good sign.

A sign Tommy was slowly coming back-- slowly regaining his reality.

"I won't, I won't. Just making sure you know I'm here for you."

There's silence again, and Ranboo's mind whirls dangerously-- he had always known that there was something Tommy wasn't telling him. Something that the kid was hiding. He'd even mentioned it to Sam, his suspicions; of course, Tommy was his best friend, so they would have never thrown him under the bus or anything, but Sam...

Sam was trustworthy, they were certain of it.

He would've told the Syndicate as well (probably just Techno, honestly), but...

Ranboo had a feeling they already knew, somehow or another.

(He feels as though he already knows too, no matter how much his mind wants to deny the possibilities).

The two of them remain like this for a while, Ranboo clutching Tommy close to their chest. Neither of them say a word, but Ranboo's more than certain that his own mind reflecting on every little thing-- little hint-- that Tommy's given... is more than enough to fill the air.

It feels like hours have passed when suddenly something loud, like an explosion, sounds through the air, and Tommy lets out a sharp yelp, jolting in Ranboo's arms before completely losing it again.

The boy scrambles away from the hybrid, eyes wide, no longer glossy with that far-away look.

"Hey, hey, Tommy--" Ranboo begins, despite the building fear he feels, glancing at the bathroom exit. He'd known something was wrong; that something was happening. He had a feeling that it had only been confirmed with the noise, and...

"It's happening," Tommy chokes out, his eyes wide, and he turns to Ranboo, as though just realizing they're there for the third time tonight, "Fuck- fuck. Ranboo, we- we have to go, there's--"

Another explosion sounds, much louder than the last, and the fluorescent lights flicker overhead. Some of the ceiling cracks and falls, in small pieces onto the floor, and Ranboo's up in an instant, grabbing Tommy by the arm and leading him towards the bathroom exit.

They can hear distant people screaming and yelling-- can hear someone that sounds a little too familiar shouting for everyone to evacuate-- and then the bathroom door opens.

Ranboo's almost ready to teleport him and Tommy as far away as possible until Tubbo comes stumbling in, eyes wide in horror and a cut across his cheek. Ash stains the sleeves of his suit and he waves the two of them out.

"We've got to get the fuck out-- *now*."

---



Techno's getting tired of the festivities.

It was interesting, at first— the arrival of the Warden, long retired hero, and the showing of Morpheus— but now it's just getting agitating.

Everyone around him seems to be feeling the same; each inching towards the front of the room, as if preparing themselves to leave the party and go home.

He glances over at where Wilbur's stood in front of the refreshments table, fingers tapping against the cloth, looking incredibly focused on something. In Techno's experience, an incredibly focused Wilbur is never a good sign.

Techno moves from his spot, submerged in the corner of the ballroom (the best hiding spot, other than a bathroom stall), to stand beside Phil.

His father seems apathetic about everything— mouth pressed into a thin line, eyes darting around the room cautiously. Calculating, almost, every move that someone makes.

“Didn't expect a reappearance of Warden,” Phil says calmly, not even glancing Techno's way.

Techno just hums, shrugging a tad. It wasn't expected, but it wasn't really a surprise, either. From the things he heard through the grapevine in the Complex, Warden used to be good friends with the party host.

Speaking of the party host—

“Have you seen the guy hostin' this thing recently?” Techno asks, putting his hands together behind his back, tilting his head a tad so he can watch Wilbur.

His twin is still standing at the refreshments table, sipping what looks to be wine, and looking right in their general direction.

Techno nods his head to the left, a motion for Wilbur to join them.

“I don’t think I have,” Phil admits, watching Wilbur methodically weave his way through the crowd to make his way towards them. “It is a little strange, really. Would’ve expected Bad to make more appearances to talk about peace and all that.”

“So that’s his name,” Techno hums, suppressing a smile when Phil snorts.

“I’ve told you his name plenty of times, mate,” Phil says, exasperated but amused at the same time.

“Yeah, well,” Techno waves his hand dismissively, the jewels glinting in the light from the chandeliers. “Oh look, there’s Wil.”

Phil turns expectantly, watching with half-lidded eyes as Wilbur makes his way towards them, looking a little irked about something in the way he holds a red glass tight.

“Careful, you’re gonna shatter that glass,” Techno jokes when Wilbur stands to his left, eyes narrowed in irritation.

“Fuck off,” the man hisses, causing Techno to snort.

“Something happened, I’m guessin’?”

“Not quite,” Wilbur murmurs, shifting on his feet uncomfortably, looking at his father from the corner of his eye, who’s gaze has been captured by the people in the ballroom. “I think we better leave.”

Phil perks up at this, cocking his head towards Wilbur, looking much like a curious bird, “Why’s that?”

“An inkling,” Wilbur responds smoothly, eyebrows furrowed, tipping his glass back and taking a sip of it.

“So something *did* happen—”

“Nothing happened,” Wilbur snaps, glaring at his twin, looking dangerously close to smashing the glass in his hand, before exhaling slowly. He shuts his eyes and reopens them after a short pause. “I just think we should leave. There’s something strange going on here that we shouldn’t stick around for.”

Techno hums in accordance, flicking his gaze towards one of the doorways leading off of the ballroom, watching as the demon hybrid that was their host converses uncomfortably with a smaller person that looks incredibly familiar.

Frowning a little, Techno tunes Wilbur out for a moment as he focuses on the two talking, on the way the smaller has his hands pressed behind his back, looking up at their host (whose name Techno *still* couldn’t remember) as if he was smaller than him.

It was hard to resist a snort— someone looking up but also looking *down* on the other person. It was comical.

The person paused for a moment, and their head turned in Techno’s direction, gaze meeting one another from across a ballroom stuffy with people and tension. They stared at one another for a moment— and hell, Techno *knew* this person, didn’t he?— before the person turned towards the host once more, departing with an incline to their head and a quick pace.

What the hell?

Techno turned towards Wilbur, who was now pouting that he'd been ignored by his brother, but was interrupted nearly immediately with a loud clinking of a glass from the center of the ballroom.

The host had somehow managed to make it towards the center— and Techno was uncomfortable with the way the hybrid's gaze lingered on a few audience members at a time, him being one of them— standing pridefully with his arms outstretched again. One of them held a glass of yellowish liquid, although Techno feared it might be apple juice posed as champagne.

“Friends,” the host— Bad, apparently— says, and every time Techno shudders at their tone, because while demon hybrids normally have too deep of voices, this one did not. “It's lovely to see you all conversing so well with one another! I hope that you're all having a great time, however, I just wanted to announce that festivities in the ballroom are slowly coming to an end.”

*Ah, Techno thought, eyeing a few exits he had bookmarked cautiously, so the night was finally reaching its climax.*

He could see a few of Manberg's greatest heroes tensing, most particularly Captain and the supposedly former ex-hero, Warden.

Morpheus, who was no longer crowded by a large group of heroes, seemed perfectly calm, as always. Not a single flaw with that guy.

Techno grit his teeth to try and subside his agitation. He could hear a small snicker coming from Wilbur beside him; he knew full well about Techno's strange dislike— *interest*, was the right word— with Morpheus.

(As if Wilbur wasn't as intrigued by the hero that seemed to be toying with them).

“I'm pleased to announce that the banquet is finally prepared for you all!” The host says then, grinning eagerly with a moon-shaped white smile that peers through the shadow-like darkness. Techno shifts with unease; the way they're being looked at is almost malicious, in a

strange, sickening way. “If you’d all follow me into the back room, I’ll show you to your assigned seating.”

The demon hybrid inclines his head towards the back room, walking calmly through the crowd of people who part in his wake, like a sea giving way to a stone. The heels of his polished shoes— and Techno can see Wilbur’s nose wrinkling out the corner of his eye— click against the marble flooring.

The heavy doors against the far side of the room open wide and all at once, everyone moves towards the room— albeit, though, their movements are wary and slow, if you ignored the few arrogant heroes that deemed this whole thing to be trustworthy.

“This is off,” Wilbur mutters into Techno’s ear as they shuffle towards the doorway, following the funnel of people walking into the next room. He actively fidgets with his black gloves, eyes skimming around the other corners of the room, calculating, counting the exits. “Where’s Bumble?”

Techno stills at this— he glances quickly around the room, looking for any sign of the tall enderman hybrid who would undoubtedly be standing within a couple inches of his husband.

He honestly couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Ranboo. Had it been minutes? Hours?

Panic set in, crawling up his throat and he shoots Wilbur a wide-eyed look through the mask, jaw set tight.

“Hopefully they’re both in the next room already,” Phil speaks up, keeping his voice lowered as they continue to move through the crowd, most of which has already entered the supposed banquet room. “I’m sure they’re fine. They are highly trained vigilantes, after all.”

“*Young* vigilantes,” Techno hisses, and Phil stills a tad, as if only just remembering.

The man’s silent for a while, then whispers, “We can only hope, alright?”

---

*“It’s kind of cold up here, Dream,” Tommy says, looking out over the entirety of Manberg, his hair blowing into his eyes as gusts of wind pass him by. The air bites at his cheeks and he sniffles, hand reaching out from his cloak to catch a falling snowflake.*

*“The lights are prettier up here than they are down there,” Dream says, calm as he stands beside Tommy, shoulders relaxed.*

*Tommy hums, shuddering with a sudden feeling of warmth as he gazes out over the various Christmas lights illuminating the city.*

*“Yeah,” he laughs a little, shortly, turning to glance at Dream’s bare expression, “I guess they are.”*

---

The banquet room is elegant, as expected from the way the rest of the building looked. Gold and red covers nearly every section of the room, from flooring to ceiling; the banquet table itself is covered in a golden, almost velvet looking tablecloth.

Despite the way everything glinted and glittered, from the saucepans that looked as though they were made of solid gold— oh, how Wilbur wondered if Techno’s tightly clenched jaw was out of fascination instead of caution— Wilbur couldn’t help but feel more unease.

The second room was bigger than the first; while it’s length was definitely accustomed to fit the banquet table, the width wasn’t too grand, leaving only a couple feet of space for the guests to take their seats at the table.

(Another thing that made Wilbur shoot a worried glance in Phil's direction, whose eyes were steely and almost prepared, was the set up of the table itself— there were name tags sat on the table, securing each guest in one particular spot).

Wilbur quickly found his name tag— The Bard— one seat from the end of the table, sat in between someone he'd never heard before called 'Icarus' and Techno.

Phil was placed directly to Techno's right, and so on, as the rest of the heroes and villains filed in and warily took their seats. The tension, if possible, had increased tenfold, and the host himself took a seat at the very end of the table, in the tallest seat.

(There was another tall seat to Wilbur's left, right beside the supposed Icarus, but it was left empty, and a person that Wilbur didn't recognize kept watching it anxiously, tapping their hands against the table cloth).

"Isn't this lovely?" Bad begins, and Wilbur's head snaps in the man's direction, lips pursing. The whole 'long spiel of speeches' was *his* thing— he didn't appreciate someone taking his brand, even if it was some demon hybrid who had the clearly deranged idea that heroes and villains could possibly get along.

Give him a break.

"Bad, I still don't quite get it," Captain speaks up again, sounding tense. She's sat on the other side of the table in between a couple other of her fellow heroes who Wilbur couldn't care to remember the names of. "I know you want to establish peace between the differences in Manberg, but why not just sign a formal document? What's with all the festivities?"

"Didn't I already establish that earlier?" Bad asks, tone sickly sweet and calm, fingers pressed together as he watches the hero. Wilbur was only minorly impressed— as far as he knew, nothing scared the Captain, and yet, here she was, fidgeting uncomfortably in her seat. "I told you what this was."

"I—" Captain pauses, composing herself, "I know, it's just... you said this was an *experiment*, Bad. That just— it doesn't sound like you."

“I’ve changed, for the better, really,” Bad says simply, smiling at the woman. It doesn’t take a smart person to know that the expression is fake. “I wasn’t lying to you when I said this was a sort of experiment, but I’m not trying to say you’re not all valuable. You’re not guinea pigs, nothing of the sort, really. You’re vessels.”

Captain blinks, recoiling as if she’d been slapped, much like many of the others, “Vessels? What do you mean, ‘vessels’?”

Bad just hums, waving his hand dismissively, “Humans are vessels, are they not? Shells with a soul inside of them; if they didn’t have that, they’d be nothing. A human body, therefore, is a vessel, of sorts.”

There’s a pregnant pause as Bad’s words sink in to his audience— resulting in bewildered glances between more of the hero crowd and unsurprised expressions from the villains— only interrupted again by Captain.

She stands abruptly from the table, slamming one of the towels down, making her side shake with force, silverware and plates clinking together. Her jaw is set, eyes narrowed dangerously (Techno wouldn’t want to be on her bad side; he always made sure he wasn’t).

“If that’s how you really feel,” she says, tone wavering but only a little, staring at Bad as though he were something rancid, “I’m leaving.”

Bad tilts his head, looking more fascinated than disappointed, “Leaving? So soon?”

“Yes,” Captain hisses, reaching down to grab a purse she’d brought, a perfect match to the red shimmering thing she’d worn. The hero turns on her heel, heading towards the exit, and Bad sighs sadly.

“I hope that it was worth it, Puffy,” he says, tone a faux thing of sadness, and the woman stills, cocking her head in his direction.



“Pardon?”

“I said that I hope it was worth it,” Bad repeats, ever calm.

Techno’s heart rate quickens.

He can feel it; the finale of the night, the reason why they’re all here. It’s building up, and everything’s going to crash eventually.

He has a feeling that ‘eventually’ is *now*.

“That *what* was worth it?” Captain asks, slowly, as though she doesn’t want to know the answer. Techno doesn’t miss the way her hand begins to trail to her thigh, undoubtedly searching for a knife, despite the guards at the front door taking all weapons.

(Didn’t stop Techno or Wilbur, though, who were both hiding knives in their boots).

“We didn’t even get to eat dessert,” Bad bemoans, leaning back in his cushioned chair as though truly upset with the ordeal, face plastered in something close to disappointment. “Skeppy and I worked so hard on the cupcakes, too... such a disappointment...”

“Bad,” Captain says, tone icy. Her eyes are wide, matching the rest of the people’s in the room, realization settling in like a rock pitting itself in one’s stomach.

The demon hybrid just sighs again, before turning his head in the direction of someone Techno’s never seen before standing just off to the side; they’re a cat hybrid, dressed in a red suit, similar to the rest of the employees in the banquet hall.

“Ant,” Bad says, tilting his head, eyes flicking towards Techno for only a millisecond (but it’s long enough for the man to grab a hold of Phil’s wrist, to begin to whip his head in warning towards Wilbur). “Press the button.”

---

The world is falling apart.

Tommy’s tucked into Ranboo’s side, barely breathing as he holds his head low, bangs covering his eyes. There’s screaming and more explosions following, although not as loud as the first.

He can feel Tubbo’s arm wrapped around his right, but he doesn’t turn to look at him. He couldn’t remove himself from Ranboo’s side if he wanted to— it was as though he were glued there, permanently drenching the enderian’s suit in salted tears.

“We have to get the fuck out of here,” Tubbo hisses, tone pitched in a way bordering on fearful. “Where’s the fucking exit?”

"I- I can probably teleport us out," Ranboo offers, shakily, and Tommy doesn't have the energy to fully process one of his best friends being an Enderman hybrid, "But... Tommy's never teleported before and, uhm..."

He can feel eyes on him, but Tommy ignores it.

"It wouldn't be fun," Ranboo finishes, voice small.

Tommy coughs, breathing in the scent of soot as he removes his face only slightly from Ranboo’s side, eyes blurry as he looks at their surroundings.

The roof has caved into the middle of the ballroom, the chandelier in pieces near the center. There's something hot radiating from the far upper left side of the room, but Tommy decides not to question it.

There's people clamoring around, there's calls and shouting for help over the smell and sound of fire blazing, over Tubbo shouting in his ear, over Ranboo's soft, muffled cries.

Everything's falling apart, everyone's probably dead now and—

And it's all Tommy's fault.

He feels sick, his knees giving way and he stumbles over some debris, coughing and wheezing and clutching his arm over his stomach. He can't breathe again, and he can't see, eyes burning with tears.

If Ranboo and Tubbo hadn't been holding onto him, he probably would've collapsed there, in the very center of the building, left to rot away with his mistakes (like he should be doing).

"Tommy, *get the fuck up*," Tubbo's frantic whispering comes in, and he can feel someone shaking his arm. "Get the fuck up, we have to get out of here before we fucking die!"

Tommy pauses for a moment, considering; he really should just stay here. Should allow himself to be covered in the tiles and ash of the ballroom, to be buried in the suit Quackity gave him, to let his legacy forever be dismantling the injustice system of Manberg.

(To forever be the one to have killed Morpheus instead of the other way around).

But...

Tubbo's pulling him up again, his grip strengthening, and he can hear the desperation in both of his friend's voices, pleading— begging him to get up, to run.

And, well...

He is selfish.

“Okay,” he murmurs, voice hoarse, limbs feeling like lead as his two friends pull him roughly to his feet again. They continue through the building, which only crumbles the more by the second, and Tommy turns his head towards where the fires began (towards where the explosions were so prominent).

It’s difficult to see, around the telephone pole that Ranboo is, but just barely, there’s someone standing in the flames.

Watching, waiting.

(Alive).

Tommy turns his head away, squeezing his eyes shut.

*Selfish*, he can almost hear the word being burned into his back, pressing right into his plasters and the indentation right on his neck, *selfish*.

(Distantly, he can hear Quackity's triumphant cries, the scream of '*Legacy*', and then he knows nothing at all).

## Chapter End Notes

the finale!! lets go! banquet is (kind of) over!

guys this chapter actually 180 kick rat'd me. it was such a pain in the ass to write.

anywh o, i got discord now in case anyone wants to yell at me for this fic or cry about c!crimeboys w/ me. the lore today actually kicked my ass so i'm kinda (head in hands, cars crashing, mitski on repeat) rn.<3

i'm still pretty sick btw which sucks so imma go pass out now<3 stay safe everyone & i hope that you're all doing well!! /gen

## **so, come on, one & all (to see the apathy)**

### Chapter Summary

Wilbur tries to call for help, but nothing comes out; he raises his arms in a desperate attempt to get a grasp of his surroundings, fingers numb and coated in something strange as he tries to push whatever weight is holding him down.

It doesn't budge.

Family leaves nobody behind.

They wouldn't leave him behind.

They'd rather die.

---

or, the fall of action.

### Chapter Notes

(chap title from the the fall by lovejoy)

weird dunk bro

---

tws: feeling of drowning, mentions/implied major character death & vague suicidal thoughts, fire & choking, manipulation, trauma response (going mute), mentions of blood, violence, & bruises, implications of previous child abuse, & self deprecating thoughts. heavy chapter loves, stay safe !

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*It's half past noon when they find it.*

*The snow has caked the cement, and the city weeps.*

*By the next day, nobody remembers.*

*By the next day, the media moves on to "better" news.*

*By the next day, there's a gravestone built.*

*A single blue butterfly amongst a jungle of overgrown flowers, an unkempt garden at the very bottom in the heart of the city.*

*By the next day, a father hangs up his weapon, and a "best friend" finds someone else.*

---

Wilbur wakes up on the ground with a weight settled heavily atop of his chest, the distinct feeling of slowly drowning ever present.

If anything, it feels like an off-branded repeat of his eighth birthday party.

Smoke fills his lungs, overwhelming, twisting knives into his chest-- he can't breathe, he can't see, he can't feel anything except the burning sensation that crawls up his throat every time he tries to inhale.

He can tell there's a weight atop his chest, crushing against him and immobilizing, but even as he opens his eyes which sting with ash, it's hard to place anything in the room.

(Wilbur can only suspect the thing that's crushing him is a piece of the ceiling, fallen from the explosion— his ears ring at the memory).

He tries to call for help, but nothing comes out; he raises his arms in a desperate attempt to get a grasp of his surroundings, fingers numb and coated in something strange as he tries to push whatever weight is holding him down.

It doesn't budge.

He chokes on a sob, ending in a string of coughs. If his eyes weren't so dry, if he didn't feel like he might be dead within the next ten minutes, then he just might allow himself to cry. To let loose tears, even though he shouldn't.

*Family leaves nobody behind.*

They wouldn't leave him behind.

They'd rather die.

He shoves down the building anxiety that comes with the realization— *what if they were dead?*— and instead examines his surroundings closer.

Everything's on fire; that much he would have known without even looking around, but the reality of seeing it only makes the bile building up in his throat that much worse.

The pretty drapery, the colour of crimson, is completely swallowed in licking flames; the banquet table has been flipped on its side, scattering the mass of golden platters and



shattering the delicate crystal glasses across the floor. He can't see anyone else; it's just him, and whatever was holding him down from standing.

(From even turning on his side, from doing practically anything, even though he was certain that his limbs wouldn't cooperate anyways).

There's a ringing in his ears again, something loud and blocking out everything else, and it's so incredibly familiar. The déjà vu, the strangely bitter taste of nostalgia-- why such a pretty word, for such a disgusting thing?-- of a burning, distant memory.

Wilbur was drowning again, just like he had fourteen years ago, but he wasn't underwater this time.

He gasps, pressing against the weight atop his chest again, and again, desperately trying to push it off-- as far away as possible, but it's heavy. He's strong, he always has been, but...

Something stings in the corners of his eyes and he closes them again, clenching his jaw.

It feels like he's there for hours (silently panicking, crushing underneath the roof's mass), but he's certain that he's only been here for no longer than five minutes.

Someone's shouting in the distance suddenly and he turns his head, reaching out a hand, coughing against the smoke filling his lungs as he calls out Phil's name, and then Techno's. To hell with secret identities-- he just wanted to go home.

It's hardly more than a croak that comes out when he says their names, throat hoarse and scratchy, but he's certain they've heard him when he recognizes the sound of someone's footsteps approaching.

Their heels click against the floorboards, and Wilbur's heart sinks drastically when he realizes there's only one set of footsteps coming towards him instead of two. He can only hope that one of them made it out safely and that it was the other looking for him.

Wilbur leans his head back, coughing some more, a hand pressed to his chest to try and forcibly remove any smoke from entering his system, but it's futile. He's already ruined and he's far too tired to register who it is approaching.

(He catches a flicker of something green, and his hope rises-- Phil. It had to be Phil).

"Bard?" a voice speaks up, distant but familiar, but Wilbur's gut twists.

That wasn't Phil.

Wilbur closes his eyes again, squeezing them tight as the footsteps grow closer. He debates about just staying here under the debris, of dying-- because death would be far better than the smug tone of the hero's voice that's approaching him when he finds him here-- but it's futile.

Wilbur knows that he's fucked when the footsteps cease and he opens his eyes, recognizing the disgustingly familiar bright green suit overhead.

Morpheus stands over him, in all of his glory, clutching his arm and hunched over a bit. He looks particularly unscathed despite the burns in his sleeves and parts of his suit. Wilbur gets a nasty taste of something bitter on his tongue at the way the hero's head tilts curiously.

"Morpheus," Wilbur chokes out, trying to level his voice to sound like something dangerous, but it's difficult with how hoarse it feels. "Come here to mock me?"

"Actually, no," Morpheus kneels down, and Wilbur feels a pang of discomfort at how he can't see the hero's facial expressions. It's always been one of the few things that he wasn't too fond of when it came to Morpheus-- how incredibly emotionless that stupid smiley-faced mask made him out to be. "I've come to help you."

Wilbur pauses, blinking.

“*What?*” He chokes out, unable to hide his surprise.

Morpheus exhales shakily, preparing to respond, but something loud crashes on the opposite side of the overturned table, shaking the ground and spreading the flames.

Both hero and villain flinch, but Wilbur moreso.

(He's always wondered if Morpheus were afraid of anything-- the hero never showed fear).

“No time to answer questions,” Morpheus hisses, bending down and heaving the heavy debris that had fallen on Wilbur off. It's times like this when Wilbur wishes that he had super strength like his twin or the hero in front of him.

As soon as the weight's gone, Wilbur lets out a string of choked coughs, sitting up slowly—his ribs *ache* with pain from the weight that had rested on top of him for Prime knows how long— and assessing the damage.

He barely gets the chance to catch his breath before Morpheus is wrapping his arm around Wilbur's waist and lifting him up, stuck against his side and dragging him through the wreckage of the banquet room.

Grimacing, Wilbur bites back a few curses— he really shouldn't cuss out Morpheus for trying to help, no matter how much he wants to— and pays attention to their surroundings.

Where there was once a whole room of people, barely any remain.

Wilbur nearly gags when he sees someone's arm sticking out from underneath a pile of debris, but feels only slightly grateful he can't name who it is (if he knew, it would only hurt worse).

They both duck underneath an overhang of wood that had fallen, pushing against the far wall to avoid a pile of wreckage lit on fire. They're heading towards the exit of the room, now, and Wilbur lets out another string of coughs, pressing a hand to his chest.

"Where's—" he coughs again, leaning his head down and pressing the fabric of his shirt to his nose to try and protect himself from the smoke, "Where's T— The Blade? And Archangel?"

"They should be in the ballroom," Morpheus responds, sounding extremely nonchalant despite the circumstances, and the man kicks the door open to the banquet hall. "Hypnos got them both out while he could and Arsonist is still working on everyone else that's been left behind."

*That's been left behind.*

That leaves a sinking, almost gut-wrenching feeling in his stomach.

The thought of someone being left behind...

Ranboo, Tubbo...

He hopes they're alright.

Maybe, if he's lucky, they're back with Techno and Phil, waiting for him.

The ballroom itself, when they walk out into it, looks distinctly different. The golden chandelier sits in the center, glass shattered around it and various tables turned over.

Even the confectionary table has been long since abandoned and every different dessert rests either on the floor or completely ruined.

Wilbur's eyes scan the ballroom, only stopping when they land on them— his family.

Phil and Techno are both standing anxiously by a window; he can see his father's feathers are haunched up in the air, moonlight decorating the side of his face as he yells at someone.

Hypnos stands opposite to them, hands raised in defense, and then the hero's head turns in their direction, and he points.

As soon as Phil's eyes go to him, Wilbur's gone.

He's taken off from Morpheus' side, ignoring the shouts from the hero, ignoring the searing pain traveling up his side and his ribs.

He doesn't stop until he nearly knocks Phil off of his feet, arms wrapped around the man's torso as he lets out a few choked sobs and coughs. He can feel his hug being returned, can hear both Phil and Techno doting over him, checking his shoulders and his hands, but he doesn't let go.

Wilbur practically melts in relief in his father's hold, choking and coughing on another oncoming string of sobs. It's embarrassing, really, for them to find him like this— being pulled out of a fiery room by who is supposed to be his mortal enemy.

It's in this moment that he realizes that he's truly *alive*, he's here, and Phil's holding onto him, hands aflutter as the man takes in his son's practically broken appearance. Techno's here too, his twin, who is watching him with red coloured eyes that scream two conflicting songs.

Phil's hands eventually rest on both of Wilbur's cheeks, cupping them gently and turning his face around, pulling him out of his arms so he can truly get a good look at him.

The heat is growing unbearable, though, and Wilbur pulls away, desperate to leave this place — to get as far away as he possibly can from fire.

"Oh my-- oh my stars, Wil-- Wilbur, look at you," Phil chokes out, and Wilbur lets out a soft cry, leaning his face into the man's hands, gently cupping his cheeks. He closes his eyes, which burn all the more from the flames and the ash slowly accumulating in the air. "My boy, my son."

Wilbur swallows another sob.

He feels a strange sense of gratitude, one he'd never felt before.

"We have to go, Phil," Techno rumbles abruptly, his voice lower than usual due to the fire. Wilbur can tell that his brother's unusually tense, particularly due to the heroes standing only a couple feet away. "Before this whole place blows."

Wilbur stills, head snapping up, "This whole place is gonna blow?"

"That's what it seems like," another voice pipes up and Wilbur turns his head a little to look at Hypnos. He recognizes the guy's voice anywhere; there wasn't a day that passed that the hero wasn't on television.

The whole city seemed to love him.

"Then how the fuck do we get out of here?" Phil seethes, and Wilbur recoils a tad at the tone of his father's voice. It's so full of confusion, of that lingering bite of bitterness that only appears when the man's on the brink of giving up.

He's only heard it a few times, each time no better than the last.

“The window’s your best bet,” Morpheus responds now, walking forwards and motioning towards the window cascading in moonlight. Flames dance in the reflection, far in the background, and Wilbur winces.

“Are you coming with us?” Phil asks, tone changing to something steely, unsure. Cautious.

Wilbur shifts uncomfortably, tilting forwards to cough, to try and relieve any sort of smoke from his lungs. There’s something strange about the situation— he could feel this even if he was on the brink of death.

“No,” Morpheus’ voice responds; it’s hoarse, but nothing compared to the way Wilbur’s feels. “Hypnos and I need to help get more people out of here.”

Phil narrows his eyes, fingertips digging into Wilbur’s shoulder, “What do you want in return?”

“Return? Return for what?” Morpheus asks, the sound of clinking as he comes forwards nearly overpowering the crackling of flames.

“For helping Wi— the Bard get out alive,” Phil says, gritting his teeth. He wasn’t the only one that hated the idea of owing a debt to Morpheus of all people.

The man laughs, long and drawn out.

It sounds fake.

“I’m a hero, you realize that, right? I *help* people; that’s my job. I don’t just let them die, even if they are...”

The man trails off, but Wilbur has a feeling he’s waving his hands in the air in explanation. Morpheus was known for his grandeur displays of conversation.

“Wouldn’t you think that letting villains die is helping them?” Phil asks after a short pause. He still sounds unsure, but less so.

(Something in Wilbur’s gut twists at the thought).

“Mm, I don’t really see what the issue is,” the hero responds, his nonchalance sending a shiver up Wilbur’s spine, despite being so incredibly warm.

“I don’t want to be in *your* debt,” Phil continues, eyes flicking to Wilbur’s face fearfully for a moment.

“Mm, we can discuss that at a later time. Consider this a peace treaty, for now,” Morpheus responds, clicking his tongue.

Wilbur lifts his head now, glaring at Morpheus, his eyes stinging. The man’s standing a couple feet away, practically intact despite the ash and debris staining gray against his eye blinding suit. Hypnos stands beside him, but his suit's in a worse condition; the sky-blue properties have been turned and almost dark gray colour.

“Why the fuck would you want that?” Wilbur hisses, staring at the blank mask the hero wears.

“You’re about to die, and that’s the question you’re asking?” Morpheus hisses, holding out a gloved hand towards a family. It’s hard not to recoil underneath the hero’s tone; it was so eerie, horrifying, despite leaning towards kind. “We can discuss this later. You should leave now, before you all end up dead. Wouldn't want all that saving to go to waste.”

Wilbur turns to Phil, his jaw set, and he can tell that his father’s thinking something over, but the man whips his head away too soon, decision made.



They'll discuss it later— Wilbur lowers his head, eyes burning. He holds his hands to his eyes and breathes in shakily. The pain in his ribs is flaring up to an exceedingly uncomfortable amount.

“I'll carry him,” Techno says overhead, and Wilbur can feel himself being tossed from one pair of arms to the next, and he sinks into the relief of his twin brother beside him (still tense in the company of heroes, as anyone who knew what they were like should be).

There's a smashing of a window and Wilbur can feel one of Phil's wings wrapping around him and Techno. He leans into it gratefully, watching through heavy-lidded eyes as they begin making their way out of the window and into the fresh air of the night.

With one last glance over Techno's shoulder, Wilbur watches as the whole ballroom crumbles in on itself, leaving nothing but a dozen goblets and glasses underneath the wreckage.

----

Tommy's always liked Ranboo and Tubbo's apartment.

It's a lot bigger than his own, being a two bedroom and two bath rather than only one; it always smells of something strange (one day cinnamon cookies, the next like something's burning, or nuclear fallout, in the strangest way possible).

He's used to it, though. No matter what, the apartment is cozy, and Tommy's grown to like it.

Now, though, he barely even registers that he's here.

The moment he steps into the living room, he sits gingerly on the sofa, every part of him shaking uncontrollably. It feels like everything's going in slow motion, from Ranboo anxiously putting on a ring-- a hybrid stabilizer, Tommy realizes, watching as the Enderian shrinks a couple inches in height— and Tubbo washes his hands multiple times.

Usually this would be the time that Tommy would start talking about something-- anything, really-- that comes to mind. Where he'd ramble on and on about the most random of topics, ranging from a book he'd read while in the library, to the new episode of his favourite television programme coming out.

He finds he can't say anything, though.

He can't tell if it's because of the smoke in the ballroom or the general shock of it all, but he can't force himself to speak. He can't bring himself to open his mouth (it's as though his lips are sticking together, like any form of breath has gotten caught in his throat).

Tommy's been this way before.

A few days after his "death"-- when he finally woke up to Quackity sitting in the armchair opposite of him, asleep-- he was unable to speak for about a month.

Quackity had called it a "trauma response", whatever the hell that meant.

(It wasn't as though Quackity had any idea how to deal with trauma-- the guy wasn't exactly the therapist type).

Either way, Tommy was mute for about a month.

Every time he tried to bring himself to say anything-- to laugh and joke with Quackity, the way they did back in the Complex, when Tommy was a sidekick and Quackity an intern-- but there was nothing to be said.

(No matter how many times Quackity would look at him with pleading eyes, mouth strained into a line, hoping, waiting for Tommy to come back to him-- to reality).

When he finally came to, finally explained the situation, how he was alive...

"Tommy," Ranboo's voice picks up a tone of concern, and the boy hangs his head. He's not Tommy. He shouldn't be called that, and he shouldn't be cared for, either. "Tommy, we--"

"Do you want to take a shower, big man?" Tubbo interrupts, coming out from around the corner of the kitchen, wiping his hands anxiously on a hand towel. He ignores the anxious, wide-eyed looks he gets from Ranboo.

Tommy doesn't respond.

"It'd be good to wash up a tad," Tubbo continues, not fazed by Tommy's inability to talk. Just understanding. "Get all of that icky stuff off and change into some more comfortable clothes, yeah?"

There's a pause, and then Tommy nods. It's slow, calculated, and it's somewhat nice to hear Tubbo's distant exhale, to see Ranboo's shoulders slump in relief.

"Here, I'll help you get there, boss man," Tubbo says, tone gentle and there's hands around his arms, pulling him up from the sofa. He can feel two pairs of hands, gentle against his back and on his shoulders, leading him down the hallway.

He's weighed down with exhaustion and he feels as though he's choking from the remnants of smoke on his clothes and in his lungs, but he can't find himself to focus on anything else than the way his hands look.

They're his hands, of course, but they don't *feel* like his hands. His fingertips are blackened — when did they get that way?— and he can just barely see the fringes of where plasters meet his wrist bone from underneath his suit sleeves.

(A sickly reminder of what he is— of what he's done).

His eyes dilate when they enter the bathroom, someone flicking on the light. He doesn't remove his eyes from his hands.

There's the sound of someone starting the bath, of people conversing over his head, but he doesn't look up.

Tommy doesn't see anything (really, he doesn't want to see anything) but the stains of ash and soot— *stars, he missed Wilbur*— until there's a hand pressing soft and cold against his cheek.

He leans into it, gaze lifting to meet Ranboo's concerned one.

“—you with us?” they're saying, tone gentle, eyes moving across Tommy's face cautiously.

Tommy can't find the words or the motivation to speak; instead, he nods.

“Okay,” Ranboo breathes, nodding, hands brushing soft against the boy's forearms. It's more for themselves than it is for Tommy, and they lower their head, breathing deeply. “Okay. I'm—I'm gonna get you some clothes to change into. Call if you need us.”

They linger there for a moment, clearly not wanting to leave.

Tommy knows what they're afraid of.

They shouldn't be.

“I'm here for you,” Ranboo says, his tone a whisper, “Tubbo is, too. We're here for you, you just need to ask. We won't let anything hurt you.”

There's silence again, and Ranboo exhales shakily, placing their forehead against Tommy's for a moment.

"You're the universe itself," he tells him. "We won't let anything hurt you."

It's such a simple, strange phrase; "*you are the universe itself.*"

There shouldn't be any underlying meaning, no emotions hidden and transferred between the phrasing, but there is, and Tommy can't help but feel a twist in his chest.

(He wasn't sure what it meant, but it felt nice, whatever it did mean).

With that, though, Ranboo's gone, one last hand lingering on his forearm replaced with a sudden cold and phantom pain of fingertips grazing a cut in his suit jacket he hadn't even noticed.

There's a click of the door shutting and then only the sound of a bath still running and the gentle buzzing of the fluorescent lights overhead the mirror (one that, at any cost, he will avoid looking into).

Tommy comes to, just barely, moving like he's on autopilot, pulling his sweaty and ashen clothing off and all but collapsing into the tub. He sinks into the water—it burns his skin, but he can't find it in him to care—and lets his head tilt back against the cold marble of the basin.

It should be a sudden reality check; being doused fully in water. But it isn't.

Not even when he sees the way the water tints a slight pink colour, or the wounds that decorate his arms and his knees (he can never bathe without undershirts on; he can't bare to see the wounds decorating his chest).

Tommy's far grown accustomed to the strange sensation of plasters under water, sticking to his skin and feeling him with dread—the texture was unbearable, *awful*, but he couldn't bring himself to take it away, either.

The mere thought of seeing what was underneath them made him sick.

(He'd promised, anyway).

There's a dull aching in his head and his back, but it's one he's grown used to. Much too accustomed to the dull feelings of a constant chill crawling up his spine, to the bruises that litter his body and give reminders to what things used to be. To what he used to be.

He eyes the canisters of shampoo and conditioner, of bath soap. It's all more normal than the stuff in Wilbur's house; then again, the Craft family proved to be something of elegance and refinery.

Tubbo and Ranboo were just... normal.

It was a bit of a relief, a strange step into what he could count as being normal again, even if the two were vigilantes (two of the most notorious ones at that).

Tommy's one for daydreaming, one for adventure and fantasies. It was his downfall, the thing Morpheus told him would be his secondary flaw (when in reality, the two knew his hamartia would always be pride— 'hubris' was the proper word, but he always found it too subtle for the meaning).

Tommy thinks that he could allow himself to feel this.

To feel normal, even if for two minutes.

It was the decline of the story, the ‘falling action,’ as his fairytales would tell him.

His entire world was cracking at the seams, everything he worked for was gone again, and the city was slowly becoming blanketed in snow once more.

Maybe he is strong, maybe he has claimed that he is a big man, one who can take care of himself, who can deal with anything that comes in his way; and yet, Tommy can’t bring himself to reach for the shampoo resting an arm’s length away.

It’s a normal scented shampoo, the average kind he sees at the supermarkets; not incredibly expensive and smells pretty good, but also not horrible and £1 like his own.

(Somehow, he doesn’t know what he’d do without the smell of honeysuckle, the dumb pretty stuff that was unused the last time he’d spent the night there. It’s strange, how nobody else seemed to use it— Tommy happened to love the scent).

He holds up his arm, slowly, and flexes his fingers in the light, watching water pour from his fingertips to his shoulder blade.

For once, his mind is empty.

He can’t fantasize, can’t pull himself away from reality.

So with a final, strange look into the tiles of the walls, counting each individual square, Tommy closes his eyes and tips his head back, submerging it under the water.

---

Phil quietly shuts the door to Wilbur's room, jaw set firm.

Wilbur would be fine; he and Techno had made sure of that when they called Ponk, who'd come over as soon as he had the chance to take a look at him.

The man had, luckily, not attended the banquet, despite being invited; apparently, he'd been with a patient most of the evening. Phil counts this as a miracle.

Techno's waiting in the kitchen, still dressed in the smoke-smelling suit, unmoved from where Phil had left him. He's clutching a mug of coffee in his hands-- the special mug with a black rose on it, one that Wilbur had made as a child for their mother. The family shared it; it was one of their greatest possessions, other than the emeralds that dangled from their ears or neck.

"He's going to be okay," Phil says, keeping his tone steady as he takes a seat across from Techno. His arms shake, despite himself, and he feels strangely as though he's aged twenty years, just from one night's troubles.

There's a long pause.

"I know that," Techno responds, eventually, tapping a fingernail against the side of the mug.

"You should get changed," Phil offers, gnawing on the inside of his cheek, eyes grazing the ash that decorates his eldest son's crimson suit. It once was a pretty thing, a gift from Kristin for Techno and Wil's eighteenth birthday party. He hated to think what his wife would do if she saw how it looked now.

Techno huffs, short, bending his head down to swirl the contents of his mug around.

"I don't want to move," he admits, sounding a little sheepish when he does.

"Why?"



"I'm thinking."

Phil exhales, "Techno, we--"

"Don't know if Ranboo or Tubbo made it out alive," Techno interjects, tone hard. "We don't know if even Niki, or- or any of our other friends made it out alive, either. We're in the dark until we finally get the reports on the news tomorrow, you realize that, right? Some of our friends could be dead, and we wouldn't know until the whole city does."

Phil clenches his jaw again, dipping his head. He knew this, of course he did.

"Ranboo's strong," he whispers, but he doesn't quite know what to believe himself.

The kid was definitely strong; both him and Tubbo were.

This didn't change, though, that they were children.

The thought makes him feel sick.

"Morpheus saved Wilbur," Techno speaks up again, bringing up yet another sore subject that makes Phil shift uncomfortably in his seat. "He saved him, and he saved you. You do realize what this means, right?"

Phil really didn't want to admit it, much less out loud.

"We're in his debt," Techno finalizes for him, tone sharp. "We're in the number one hero's debt, Phil, and there's nothing we can do to get out of that."

"I know," Phil murmurs, and he must sound like a broken record now, because Techno lets go of his mug to place his forehead against the cool of the table. Phil reaches forwards, cautiously placing his hand atop his son's hair. "I know."

There's another long pause and Phil shifts his fingers carefully through Techno's hair, pulling out the fallen soot stuck in the strands, dusting away the debris.

"They're all going to pay, Phil." Techno whispers, sudden, his voice much softer than normal, but it maintains the threat well.

Phil exhales slowly.

"I know."

"Bad, Daedalus, the waiters, whoever else was involved," Techno seethes, slow and dark, "All of them are going to die, and I'm going to be the one who kills them."

Phil smiles, but it's strained, "You won't be doing it alone. I can promise you that much."

Another short pause.

"Thank you, Phil."

## Chapter End Notes

this is officially my least favourite chapter crab rave !

anyways, guys? guys. that mcc actually had me on the verge of tears. we had so many crimeboys moments i'm gonna Dye ! all we have to hope for now is c!crimeboys & my

week will be made, my crops will be watered.

# i'm tired of wanting more (i think i'm finally worn)

## Chapter Summary

It wasn't as though he didn't believe this— of course, he did, it was them— but he couldn't really trust them to keep their word just yet.

If they knew who he was, they'd be singing a different tune.

He isn't ready for that.

(Even though a part of him is practically scream at him to just tell them and get it over with already, to rip the bandage off while the wound's still fresh).

or, Tommy's Interlude because i will do anything for crimeboys crumbs at this moment

## Chapter Notes

chap title from 'a burning hill' by mitski !

---

**tws:** derealization, heavy self deprecating thoughts, unreliable narrator (!!!), mentions / implications of past child abuse, talk of last chapter's events (mildly)

as always, stay safe! <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy's staring at himself in the mirror.

Wet hair hangs loose over his eyes.

He isn't himself, and he knows it.

*What am I, then?* He wonders, refusing to make eye contact with his reflection, but staring at the plasters that cling to his neck, showing just above the collar of a borrowed jumper.

He fears he knows the answer, but ignores it anyways.

---

“So,” Ranboo exhales, a finger tapping against his knee.

Tommy hums under his breath, curled up on the sofa across from where his friend sits, knees pulled to his chest and one of Ranboo's soft blankets wrapped around his shoulders. It's a loose but safe thing.

“So,” Ranboo repeats again, blinking owlishly, shifting uncomfortably from where they've taken a seat, cross-legged on the carpet.

It's clear that they're unsure where to go with this conversation, where to take it. Tommy would be, too, if he had to ask his best friend he'd known for months what connections they had tied to heroes and shit (especially if said friend previously stated how much he hated heroes and all that).

Then again, Tommy assumes he *does* know what that feels like, stealing another cautious glance in Ranboo's direction. The guy was secretly a vigilante; so was Tubbo.

He couldn't really blame them for being curious when he was, too.

What he could blame them for was being overly curious. He couldn't care less about them being vigilantes; truly, he felt almost indifferent towards it, and would say so out loud (even if something in his chest tugged with obvious offense that they hadn't told him).

Tommy, though, isn't sure he wants to start this conversation himself.

It had been three or so days since the banquet and he hadn't really spoken much except for a murmured "morning" to the both of them the day before and a "thank you" when Ranboo set a pile of pancakes dripping with syrup in front of him only an hour ago.

It wasn't much, but it was definitely a step, and he could tell by the way his friends brightened up a tad that they were proud of him, even if it he was still unable to laugh and joke like he did beforehand.

(His thoughts and feelings were a strange whirlwind he could never quite get a grasp on; one part of him told him one thing and the other told him a completely opposite thing).

"Tommy, you know that we're not angry with you, right?" Ranboo speaks up again, and Tommy gnaws on the inside of his cheek.

He did know that.

They'd both told him that about four times a day since *that night*. That they weren't angry with him, that he was doing so well, that they were here for him. That they would protect him.

It wasn't as though he didn't believe this— of course, he did, it was *them*— but he couldn't really trust them to keep their word just yet.

If they knew who he was, they'd be singing a different tune.

He isn't ready for that.

(Even though a part of him is practically scream at him to just tell them and get it over with already, to rip the bandage off while the wound's still fresh).

"We're here when you want to talk about it," Ranboo continues, keeping their voice steady, "We aren't forcing you to say anything at all, just... we just want to make sure you're, uhm, that you're alright."

Tommy nods shortly, curling his knees further up to his chest.

Ranboo gives him a sad smile, turning their head when Tubbo comes walking into the room, arms carrying a load of clothing.

Tommy grimaces a tad when he recognizes his crimson suit that he'd worn that night in the middle of the stack of clothes, right underneath a few clothing articles he can only assume is Ranboo's by the way the guy reaches out gratefully.

There's silence for a moment, as Tubbo dumps a whole pile of clothes into Ranboo's arms, leaving only a weird cloth in his own.

Tommy keeps his eyes fixed on his friend, watching the boy slump next to him on the sofa and hold his empty hand out, not even looking Tommy's way, but offering. An invitation, a reminder that he cares.

He takes it gratefully, suppressing a small smile.

"Clingy," he whispers to Tubbo, hating how his voice still rasps a little from being unused.

“Sure,” Tubbo says in response, giving Tommy a big, genuine smile.

They stay like that for a while, just basking in one another’s presence (all whilst Ranboo folds clothes) and it feels nice. It feels almost right, to just be here with them, to be sat right in the middle of the two, silent and calm.

(But it isn’t correct, and Tommy doesn’t deserve to be this calm in these circumstances, and he knows it).

He clears his throat, letting go of Tubbo’s hand and drawing his arms back around his knees, settling his chin atop of them.

Maybe he should just do it.

Just tell them and get it over with.

They want to know, anyways.

He can see their glances at his arms, at his neck, at the way dark circles cling to his eyes. It’s obvious that they want to know— that they’d shake the information out of him if given the chance to— but...

“Hey, Tommy, I forgot to tell you,” Tubbo pipes up, interrupting his train of thought, patting him gently on the shoulder with two fingers (the way he does when wary of Tommy’s current boundaries of being touched).

It’s only when Tommy glances over at him, eyebrows slightly furrowed, that Tubbo continues, “I got you something.”

Tommy hums curiously, tilting his head.



Tubbo just grins, holding up a piece of pale blue cloth in his hand, one that resembles a handkerchief, in a way. There's a little white 'T' engraved on the edge of it.

"It's a bandana," Tubbo says in response to Tommy's blinks of confusion, "You can wear it around your wrist, your ankle, your neck— anywhere, really. I just thought that you'd like one, to..."

Tubbo waves his hands around, still holding the handkerchief in his fist, before smiling wider when Tommy eagerly holds his hands out, feeling a rush of complete warmth.

"I know blue's not really your colour," Tubbo begins, watching with a shine to his eyes as Tommy looks the thing over in his hands, brushing the pads of his fingers against it, relishing the texture of soft fabric. "But I just thought it'd kinda, you know, match your hair. It's contrasting colours or something."

Tommy snorts, looking at Tubbo, "Where did you learn about 'contrasting colours,' big man?"

Tubbo visibly straightens, clearly happy to hear Tommy speaking in longer sentences than three words, "Wilbur showed me! We went to a little crafts store, oh— Tommy, man, you should've seen the way he lit up when I told him I wanted to make you something—"

Tommy flushes, digging his nails into the fabric and bringing it close to his heart.

*Wilbur:*

His hand flies to the gold chain hanging around his neck, emerald tucked comfortably underneath his jumper. It brings him a sense of relief, a feeling of estranged protection.

Tommy would be lying if he said he hadn't been thinking about him (or Techno, or Phil, or *Sam*) over the past couple of days.

He...

He really missed them.

Wilbur especially.

No, scratch that—he didn't want to inflate Wilbur's ego, even in his own mind.

"Thank you," Tommy whispers during Tubbo's rambling, looking at the cloth again, running his finger over the engraved *T*. "Really, Tubs. Thank you."

Tubbo smiles, "Anything for you, Big T."

For the first time in a while, Tommy returns it.

---

It's another three days before Tommy tells them.

He's made progress over the course of them, improving his ability to talk more, to laugh more—it's a slow thing, but it's working.

Nevertheless, the hardest thing about it (other than waking up in the same house as his two best friends that nearly died because of him, feeling a twist of guilt with each glance their way)—it had to be calling in sick to both of his jobs.

Sam had been more than understanding; he'd sounded sick himself over the phone, stating that he'd probably close shop for the week as well, hoping that "they both got better"; Tommy would just smile into the receiver with sodden eyes.

Eldritch Wings was a separate story on its own— Phil had picked up, sounding cheery as ever, and honestly relieved that Tommy had chosen to take a couple days off. It was agitating how warm that made him feel— that Phil truly cared about him.

(The feeling was quickly overridden with the familiarity of guilt, of horror piling up his throat, and he promptly hung up the phone with a simple hoarse goodbye).

*Confliction*, Tommy presumes, is yet another one of those "fatal flaws" that Dream had been so obsessed with pointing out— he had once been told the opposite, though, that his hope was too strong, that his spark burned too bright.

(He feared that it may be different, now).

Maybe it's just self hatred, something he knows is a constant with himself with the way his friends throw him anxious glances, with the way they don't stop staring at the plasters wrapped every this way and that on him.

(Ranboo had practically begged him to let them give him new ones, to check on whatever it was hiding beneath Tommy's, but it was futile).

Still, Tommy would be lying if he said that it wasn't nice whenever his friends would sprinkle compliments into their everyday conversations, from Tubbo simply calling him *boss man* to Ranboo smiling at him like he's the world (*the universe itself*, Tommy remembered him saying, but the very idea made him feel strange).

Tommy knows he's growing attached quickly.

He already was attached, but now he's fearing he may be going too far off the deep end, just as he did with the Craft family—he fears that if he goes too far, if he gets too attached (and stars, he always did) he may just fall.

They try to convince it out of him, 'the reason,' for days; it slowly dwindles, though, as they realize it's for him to talk about when he wants to, not when they want him to.

Tommy's grateful, truly, but when he gets attached, it gets harder and harder to lie.

It's when the three of them are gathered on the rooftop of the apartment complex on one of the nights, stargazing, that Tommy comes clean— lets loose, gives them the truth.

(It's also here that Tommy realizes he may be losing it, because he had never expected to tell anyone else this— maybe he knows that he's growing closer and closer to death, that his time is only just around the corner, or maybe it *is* just a reckless decision).

Tommy's wrapped in Ranboo's clothing when he tells them; Tubbo's was too small for him to fit into, but he isn't complaining, even if he had to tie Ranboo's clothes several times for them to fit properly. He's got the bandana that Tubbo made for him tucking his bangs away from his face, tied just beneath the length of his curls.

It was supposedly a very on the whim decision, not something he had expected to talk about, but rather came out of the blue. This did happen frequently when he spoke; his mind went in several directions at once and occasionally words would just spill out without direction.

This was one of those times, but it felt different than that.

Tommy was telling them about himself.

About where he really came from, about who he truly was, and the very thought of his own self made him violently sick to his stomach.

Either way, it's something that must be spoken about.

It's inevitable.

"I was a hero, once," Tommy starts, tone hushed, ignoring the way his friends tense on either side of him. The cold of the pavement below seeps into his clothes and he shivers, wrapping his arms around himself in a desperate attempt to ward it off.

(Something painful strikes it way against his spine, the cold a bittersweet feeling to the influx of aches).

Tommy waits for a moment, listening, but both of his friends are completely silent, giving him the floor to speak.

He isn't sure if he appreciates it or not.

"I was an okay one," Tommy whispers, even as his voice breaks. He probably shouldn't be saying that—he wanted so badly to be a great hero that he would spend hours trying to convince himself that he was one (but he just never seemed to live up to Morpheus' standards). "I wasn't really a *hero*, though. Not in Manberg's eyes—not—uhm, not in anyone's eyes."

He pauses, closing his eyes for a moment, remembering the amount of times his shoulders would sink, excitement fizzling whenever everyone would just call him 'Morpheus's sidekick.'

Never *Theseus*, never his own person.

Always Morpheus'.

Always *Dream* 's.

“I was just a sidekick,” he says it aloud now, hating the way it jabs at his chest to hear it coming from his own voice, even though he’s told this story before. “I tried so hard to become something more, to be someone more, but I never was enough.”

Another pause; a breeze brushes against his cheeks, painting his nose a delicate red. He resists the urge to glance at his friends, to see if they're catching on, but he’s certain that they are. Everyone knew the infamous story of Theseus—probably not the Greek myth, but *his* story.

They never paid attention long enough to know the *true* story, though— it was never the heroes who told history, only the victors— but they read in between the lines. They consumed what the media gave them; what *Dream* gave them.

“I was there because it’s my destiny,” he whispers, his tone hushed. “You asked what I meant, and this is what I’m going to tell you; it’s my legacy to have been there. I should’ve been the one to blow it to smithereens, to watch as the people who built me up and tore me down just for their own amusement suffer.”

He chokes on his breath, “But I- I didn’t know that you two would be there— that everyone would be there. I was told it’d only be those who wronged me... not... not everybody. It felt wrong. Horrible. I wanted to be sick— I still do— I’m so fucking sorry. I’m *so fucking sorry*.”

There’s another break in his explanation as Tommy chokes on sobs, hands now pressed to his face to try and hide his overflow of tears. He hated people seeing him cry— hated the looks of pity on their faces when they watched his cheeks flare with red, his nose shrivel in pain, his eyes squint with water.

He can feel someone grabbing his arm, Tubbo’s hand offering a life support, and Ranboo resting their own hand against his shoulder blade.

Two different friends, two different ways of showing that they're here, and he appreciates them both.

It takes a while for Tommy to calm down, to dig his nails into his cheeks and drag them away from his eyes, to gasp in deep breaths and face the world.

"I saw *him* there," he whispers, tone breaking again, "And Gods, he looked so- so horrific, and I wanted to kill him, right then and there, but I just... couldn't. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move."

Tommy stops himself, tongue catching at the right moment. He would tell them this, but he wouldn't go too far. He fears he already has, but it's too late, anyways.

He clears his throat a little before continuing.

"So I hid in the bathroom. Like a *coward*," he finishes, his voice so quiet that he's certain that they didn't hear it until he hears a choked, saddened noise coming from Ranboo. "I- I thought I would've been able to do something but I just..."

Tommy trails off, every word he'd wanted to say disappearing from his mind, leaving it a blank slate. He tips his head backwards, arms wrapped around himself, a thumb rubbing gently against his own forearm. He relishes in the soft texture of Ranboo's jumper, how it smells of cinnabons and fish tanks.

"I'm so, so fucking sorry," he whispers, up into the night, to the stars, to the universe. "If I had known what would've happened, I would've killed B— *the host*— from the start. I swear it, by every single God I can think of."

He quiets down now and he can hear Tubbo sniffing to his left, Ranboo's soft cries to his right.

It's a selfish thing, Tommy thinks, that he's crying; that he *himself* cried over his own actions, over his own undoing. He doesn't deserve to let this go, to unbottle all of his emotions out of nowhere to two best friends he'd almost killed.

"It's not your fault," Ranboo whispers suddenly and Tommy feels like he's been backhanded across the face.

He turns, wide-eyed, to stare at his best friend. The hybrid's mismatched eyes shine in the moonlight, reflecting the galaxies that can only be seen from certain parts of Manberg. There is no pity in their eyes— just concern.

"What?" Tommy whispers, hating the way his voice breaks, a threat that he may sob again soon. He buries it.

"It's not your fault," Ranboo repeats, reaching forwards and cupping the side of Tommy's face with his hand, "Don't— don't you dare think it is, Tommy, because *Gods*— this isn't— Tommy, anyone who was in your position would do the same thing."

Tommy shakes his head furiously, tears stinging his already raw cheeks.

He wants to say something, to tell Ranboo to fuck off, to tell Tubbo to stop crying for him, to stop clinging to his arm, but he can't find the words for it.

"You're *fifteen*, Toms," Ranboo continues, sounding choked when Tommy physically recoils at the nickname, "Don't even try to deny it either, it's not hard to see... but... you— *stars*, Tommy, you've been through so much. *So much*. And you don't deserve any of it."

"You don't even know who I am," Tommy whispers, eyes burning as if he's back in the ballroom lit on fire, the horrible feeling of ash clinging to his eyelashes something close to *deja vu* now.



“We don’t have to know,” Tubbo insists suddenly, voice wavering, his grip around Tommy’s arm tight, “No matter who it is, who you are, we will love you, anyways.”

Tommy hates crying in front of people but, just for tonight, he allows it; lets his two best friends, the stars, and the moon be his only witness.

## Chapter End Notes

wheeewww i actually reallt liked this chapter which is weird ! it started off funky but idk :) maybe i just like writing tommy’s perspective a lot , even if he is a *massive* unreliable narrator.

promises for identity reveal at some time o’clock, i’m sick again beloveds, i hope u guys stay safe & all !

(pspspsp crimeboys come back i miss u guys)

# **the craft family traditions are like a horror film disguised as a hallmark movie**

## Chapter Summary

“This is so dumb.”

Wilbur blinks, setting down one of the big bins labeled 'Ornaments' atop the coffee table.

"You don't like decorating?" he asks, clicking the things holding the bin's lid down and lifting it off.

"No? Only fucking weirdos like you enjoy decorating," Tommy says, throwing his hands in the air. Then he adds in a lower tone, bitterness taking on an edge to it, "Christmas is stupid, too."

or, back to regularly scheduled programming of fluff haha yep. fluff. take ur crimeboys, gigglechampduo, angelduo, and go <3

## Chapter Notes

TWs: platonic possessive behaviour, talk of blood, self deprecating thoughts, smoke-inhalation aftermath, mild sickness, death jokes, christmas (if applicable), vague religious trauma, talk of dead parents, implied child abuse, heavy unreliable narrator

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"I'd bleed myself dry for family."*

It was a statement that Technoblade had long lived up to, in one way or another.

The times that he'd frequently saved his brother or his father from danger-- even if doing so resulted in someone else getting hurt-- were too many to count.

Wilbur never liked it when Techno got revenge if he were the one who'd been hurt, saying that "violence wasn't the answer." Techno called him a hypocrite every time, saying he would've done the same, but worse, if it were *him* in Wilbur's place instead. That usually shut his twin up.

This time was not any different.

His twin brother was bedridden; his best friend, his family, his blood.

Wilbur had smoke inhalation and a bad case of fatigue that followed it.

The diagnosis was nothing horrible that Wilbur couldn't end up rehabilitating from (it wasn't as though Wilbur was on death's door like Phil had been three years prior), but it was still something that caused Techno to pace in front of his brother's bedroom door, axe in hand, for *hours*.

He rarely rested and, on the rare occasion that he did, he would beg Phil to take his place in front of the door to "stand guard" for him. In other cases, Techno would fall asleep right there on the floor, his back to Wilbur's shut door, hair covering his face (he hated people seeing his resting expression, even family).

This lasted for days until Wilbur was finally on his feet and moving around the house, casting Techno grins whenever the man would help him down the stairs or whatnot. Wilbur was a clingy person and if Techno wanted to show affection for one of the first times in his life, who was he to deny it?

Even though Wilbur was getting better progressively, it didn't staunch Techno's bloodlust, his need to find who'd done this in the first place and tear them apart limb by limb.

All it would take was time and planning and, eventually, he'd find them.

He'd have to start with Daedalus, if he can locate them, and the strangely excited demon hybrid who'd supposedly been the host— Bad, they were called, as Phil had to constantly remind him— then he'd truly be able to showcase his revenge.

Techno was deemed the "God of Blood" for a reason, after all.

---

Wilbur was stressed.

This wasn't abnormal, really. One of his default modes when he wakes up is stress, but this time he really felt as though something was pushing on his chest, squeezing his airways—and he couldn't quite figure out why.

He paces the main room, back and forth, comfortably wrapped in his quilt (the one mother had made for him), ignoring the weird looks he keeps getting from Phil.

"You know, it'd be good if you sat down," Phil says, fingernail tapping against his mug, eyes following Wilbur each time he paces. "Smoke inhalation isn't anything too serious, but it still is nothing to joke about—"

"I want to see Tommy," Wilbur interrupts, still focused on each step he takes.

"You're still sick, Wil," Phil responds, blinking. "Don't you think he'd be a little weirded out to find you hoarse?"

Wilbur shoots him a look, "He was just sick as well, don't you think he'd put two and two together and think that I just caught a similar cold?"

Phil exhales, leaning back into the sofa cushions, "Look, Wil, you know I miss him just as much as you do, but I doubt his parents would like it if we asked him to come over while he's

still recovering.”

Wilbur stops pacing and turns, “What?”

“His parents,” Phil repeats, frowning at Wilbur in concern, looking very close to standing up to take the man’s temperature again, “You know, his guardians? The people that raised him?”

That's it.

Tommy's parents.

How didn’t he put it together before?

Something Tommy had said, a long time ago, when Wilbur was walking him home that night Morpheus attacked the Syndicate. He hadn't originally picked up on it due to his instincts buzzing underneath his skin, the feeling of someone watching them, but...

Now, he has a sinking feeling that he knows something that he probably shouldn't.

“Phil, I think Tommy's lying to us.”

---

Tommy wraps his cardigan tighter around himself, barely even tossing a glance in Phil's direction when the man twists the key into the door.

“It’s great to see you back,” Phil says kindly, giving Tommy a warm grin as he enters the bookstore. The older rubs his face with both of his hands to try and ward off the cold, wearing a pair of thick green gloves that make Tommy want to stop and call him old again.

The boy just hums instead, clearly exhausted as he barely acknowledges Phil out loud. He takes his place behind the front desk, propping his chin on his hands.

It is nice to be back, he figures; even though it's a little early since the event happened (this was mostly according to two motherhens that hadn't even wanted him to go back to his apartment, much less work).

"Didn't miss me too much, did you?" Tommy mumbles, giving Phil a sheepish smile.

"Loads, actually," Phil just responds much too simply, ruffling Tommy's hair as he passes towards his office, hands coming up to pull his hair back into a neatly tied green ribbon- the way he always keeps it when working.

Tommy blinks at the loss of Phil's hand in his hair, feeling a sudden curl of warmth pass through him that he really shouldn't feel. It wasn't like Phil was his father— like the man was someone he should constantly be trying to make proud or anything.

He wasn't, and yet some part of Tommy was beginning to think he was.

(A part that he would really like to stamp into the ground and bury with a bundle of roses).

"Tommy!" Karl calls from the other side of the bookstore, immediately grabbing Tommy's attention.

The guy's grinning wide, sticking his head out from behind a bookshelf. His iconic multicoloured glasses (really, how does he see out of those?) are positioned on top of his curls, purple and pink gloves gripping the side of the shelf.

There's nothing different about Karl, minus the strange fading of his hoodie that had once been extremely vibrant. Maybe he'd just washed it weirdly. Tommy always despised doing

laundry so he was no stranger to mishaps when it came to that chore.

“Hey, Karl,” Tommy calls, giving the man a bit of a wave. “You alright?”

“Better that you’re here!” Karl says, walking over to Tommy with a bounce in his step. He pats the younger enthusiastically on the shoulder once he’s close enough (it was known to Tommy that Karl’s love language was touch). “I heard you were sick, bro. That really sucks.”

“Yeah, it did suck,” Tommy laughs nervously, shooting a glance towards Phil’s office. Why is he feeling so anxious around Karl of all people? Karl was like his best friend— he had been for a long time. “You know how it is, though. Flu season.”

“December’s a flu season?” Karl asks, completely blanking, and Tommy winces. He’d forgotten, again, that it was December— still, though, it *was* flu season, just not the one he’d originally thought it was.

“Winter, innit?”

“Well, either way, it’s good to have you back. I can finally talk about solar systems and supernovas with someone who doesn’t fall asleep every five seconds,” Karl’s grin widens, hands steering Tommy by the shoulders towards the scientific area of bookshelves.

Tommy snorts, “Old man falling asleep on you in the break room, huh?”

“You have no idea, Tommy. It’s ridiculous. I even tried watching Steven Universe with him and he couldn’t keep awake.”

“Damn,” Tommy pats Karl on the forearm sympathetically, “That sucks, big man.”

For once, Tommy’s pity is genuine.

If someone couldn't stay awake during Steven Universe, that was an automatic red flag in his opinion.

---

Tommy huffs, hauling a box of books into the break room and gently putting them down onto a large fold up table set up back there.

Almost immediately, he slumps down into one of the chairs, setting his forehead down against the cold of the tabletop, exhaling.

After a couple of days in bed rest— and mostly consisting of staying inside due to Tubbo and Ranboo's constant nagging— Tommy had forgotten how difficult it was carrying books around Eldritch Wings.

He hums, turning his head to the side, watching as Phil enters the break room carrying a coffee mug with *#1 Dad* engraved on it in neat lettering (if he squints, he can see red handwriting, neatly putting 'za' on the end of 'Dad').

"Hey, Phil," he says, smiling at the guy, who returns the grin kindly. He had forgotten how much he really did miss Phil— getting up early that morning had hardly given him the opportunity to say proper hellos to the man.

"Tommy," the man greets, setting his mug down underneath the coffee machine and then turning to face him, leaning against the countertop, "Good to see you're waking up a bit more."

"I just needed to get some work done, you know how it is," Tommy responds, propping his cheek up on his crossed arms, relishing the way the sunlight tipping through the windows is warming his side



Phil hums a little, pausing before saying, “Wilbur’s missed you, you know.”

Tommy coughs— rather, chokes— on his own saliva, knocking a fist into his chest so that he can breathe properly again.

“Yeah, well,” he coughs again, voice hoarse, trying desperately to ignore the amused look on Phil’s face, “I’m very— I’m very missable.”

“Is that another one of those words you made up?”

“I don’t make any words up, Phil, and if I did, then they’d have to put my name on the dictionary, and that simply wouldn’t do,” Tommy responds, pointing a finger at the man.

Phil just tilts his head, eyes scanning Tommy’s face, reeking of that disgusting fondness. How awful.

“I’ve missed you too, you know,” he says, and Tommy freezes, certain that if this continues, his heart just might stop. “Tech has as well. He talks about you a lot, always complaining that he hasn’t got anyone else to talk his Greek tragedies with.”

*Ouch*, Tommy thinks, but it's in a positive way.

"We didn't want to bother you while you were sick, though. Wilbur kept nagging me about you, nearly every day, going on and on about how he wanted to see his 'favourite little brother.'"

Tommy glares at him, but there’s no fire behind it.

Little brother, Wilbur had said.

It was nothing new, obviously, but that doesn't mean it didn't make him feel as though he's dying every time it's said.

“Like I said, I’m missable,” Tommy grumbles, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

There’s a pause for a moment, insecurity taking over.

He then adds, albeit quietly, “Did you really miss me? All of you?”

“Of course we did. You’re practically a member of our family now, but you know that already, don’t you?” Phil responds immediately, holding his coffee cup out to motion towards Tommy’s chest, where the emerald Wilbur gave him sits comfortably.

Tommy lowers his head, clenching his jaw to suppress a smile, a hand coming up to gently reposition the emerald to a better way of catching the sunlight.

"It was about time he'd give you one, really," Phil says with a chuckle, and Tommy sends another halfhearted glare in his direction. “I was getting tired of hearing his shit every other day about how he wanted to gift you one.”

Tommy smiles to himself, flushed with warmth.

It was too much, really, this endless supply he’s receiving of how much people *care*.

“What would your wife say if she heard you talking like this?” Tommy mumbles, looking back down to examine the emerald closer. He's spent a lot of time just looking at it- fumbling it around between his pointer finger and his thumb, watching the way the sunlight reflects at the surface of the green. "Inducting some random child into your weird family dynamic."

Phil chuckles, "She agrees with me, actually."

Tommy freezes, turns, eyes wide— "What do you mean, she agrees with you? What, have you- have you told her about me?"

"Of course I have, I write to her daily. Do you expect me not to tell her about the kid that Wilbur's practically taken in?" Phil's wearing this stupid shit-eating smirk now, head tilted, "She's just as accepting of you being a part of the family now as Wil was, and that's saying a lot."

Tommy stares at him.

He isn't sure if he should be feeling appreciative or not.

"What the fuck- no, no," Tommy holds up his hands, dropping the emerald back to rest comfortably against his cardigan, "You're fucking with me, right? Phil, you can't- you told your *wife* about me?"

"Wilbur gave you an emerald," Phil deadpans, lifting his finger from his mug's handle to point at it, "Our family doesn't give very many of those out, you know."

*No, I don't know*, Tommy thinks, despite shifting in his chair a bit, overwhelmed. Did this make him special, then, if they only gave it out to certain people?

It didn't, right?

He just so happened to be someone that got an emerald.

"You should come over tonight," Phil suggests suddenly, and it's dangerous how exciting that invitation really is.

"Tonight?" Tommy repeats, suddenly beaming, meeting Phil's eyes, "Seriously?"

"Yeah, that is, if it's alright with your parents," Phil tacks on, eyes scanning Tommy's face curiously, watching as the boy simply shrugs.

"I'm sure it's fine," he responds calmly, then frowns, "But I, uhm, I do have my shift at Nook's later tonight..."

Phil waves his hand dismissively, "That's fine- I can come pick you up after your shift's over and bring you over."

Tommy's grin only grows.

"Really? You'd do that?"

"Of course. I can't have you walking alone at night-- you're much too young to do that," Phil says, and Tommy winces audibly.

He'd completely forgotten that he'd let that little secret slip-- that Phil knows now that he's fifteen. That was a fuck-up that he'd also forgotten to let Quackity in on, but...

It wasn't as though he planned on having a civil conversation with Quackity anytime soon.

(A fist fight, maybe).

"Your secret's safe with me, Toms," Phil says calmly, looking nothing less than kind, "I promise you."

He isn't sure how much he can trust that, but... Phil doesn't really seem the type to just spill someone else's secrets for the fun of it.

Blackmail isn't Philza Craft's style, he thinks, holding back a laugh.

Then again, he'd be lying if he said there wasn't something-- even if it were small-- untrusting about Phil's aura.

Even so, Tommy gives him a watery smile.

"Thanks, Mr. Phil."

"Please, Tommy, we've been over this. Just call me Phil."

"Right, uhm- sorry. Phil. Thanks."

----

The second that Tommy walks in to the back door of Nook's, he is greeted with a pair of warm arms and someone that smells overwhelmingly of freshly baked bread.

He pauses, slightly bewildered, but it's... nice.

Sam's always had good hugs, anyways.

"It's good to see you," Sam murmurs into his hair, giving Tommy a gentle pat on the back before pulling away, face plastered with a big smile.

Sam's one of those guys whose smiles are always nice, just like Phil's.

"Seems like everyone's missed me lately," Tommy jokes, frowning at Sam's face- he had been sick, too, he remembers from calling in that he'd miss a couple days of work, but it looks like Sam's been more than just sick. There's a white plaster over his nose and slitting through one of his eyebrows.

He can't help but ask, tone bordering on concern, "Did you get into a fight or something while I was gone, big man?"

Sam snorts, brushing a finger against his eyebrow where the plaster is out of instinct, "No, Tommy, I didn't get into a fight... not exactly, really."

Tommy's eyebrows raise a little, "Did you get jumped, then? Robbed? Holy shit- did I miss some asshole trying to rob a fuckin' *pastry shop*?"

"Yeah, sure, kiddo. That's what you missed," Sam responds, ruffling his hair with an eye roll. "Get to work before I dock your pay."

"You wouldn't, though."

"Yeah, I wouldn't."

----

Tommy's shift at Nook's ends a lot quicker than he'd thought.

Normally, he's doing anything to pass time a lot faster-- sweeping the floor four times in a row, anxiously watching the news for any signs of heroes in the areas he has to walk home, etc. Really anything that'll distract him from the endless ticking of the clock in the corner.

Today, though, it feels as though time goes by far too quickly.

One minute, he's hugging Sam hello, and in the next, Phil's honking his horn out front, signaling that he's here to pick Tommy up.

It's exciting, but...

"I'll be seeing you, then," he tells Sam, tossing him a vaguely sad smile, which is quickly returned.

"Be seeing you," Sam responds, ruffling the boy's curls with care.

They pause, and then Tommy's being swept into another bone-crushing hug, the scent of flour and bread ever present.

"I'm always here for you, kiddo," Sam murmurs, "I know I'm your boss, but I'm also your friend. If you ever need to talk to me about anything, I'm only a phone call away."

Tommy's face warms.

"Thanks, Sam," he responds quietly, unsure of what else to say, even though thousands of words are ready to leave his mouth.

Sam pats him on the back-- gently, still, always-- then lets go.

"Have a nice night, alright?" He says, and Tommy smiles.

"You too, big man."

----

"Are you ready to go?" Phil asks, leaning an arm over the passenger seat and tilting his head towards Tommy, a grin plastered on his face.

Tommy, surprisingly, returns it before hopping into the seat, shutting the door behind him. He's practically bouncing up and down in the seat, radiating pure excitement.

It's weird how he'd gone from a strange autopilot work mode back in Nook's to this sudden (and probably temporary) burst of energy.

"I'm always ready, Phil," he responds, buckling his seat belt with a click, turning to the man, but pausing to frown at what is in the backseat. "Uhm, Phil- why have you got some big ass bins in the back?"

Phil hums, turning the key in the ignition and cruising out from where he'd parked in front of the bakery, "I didn't tell you?"

"Didn't tell me what?" Tommy begins, suddenly apprehensive. "Are you gonna- Phil, are you kidnapping me and selling my organs online?"

Phil bursts into laughter, the kind where it shows he's truly surprised by something that Tommy's said, leaning forwards against the steering wheel.

"Fucking hell, Tommy, of course I'm not going to- why the fuck would you think something like that, mate?"

"Well it's the only logical explanation, innit?" Tommy splutters, waving his hands about, eyes wide, "Got some- fuckin' big ass bins, and if you aren't moving out of your goddamn mansion



anytime soon, then you're definitely--"

"It's Christmas decorations from the storage unit, Toms," Phil interrupts, still snickering, head shaking, "Didn't I tell you that's what we were doing tonight? Decorating the house?"

Oh.

Tommy shrinks back against the passenger seat, something pooling in his stomach close to dread.

He probably should've known that.

The Craft family is normal.

He isn't.

"Ah, well," Tommy clears his throat, arms crossed over his chest, "That's boring. Decorating and shit- who the fuck wants to do that?"

"Wilbur loves decorating," Phil responds simply, and Tommy's eyes narrow further.

"Of fucking course he does, have you *met* him?"

Phil chuckles again-- warmly, like a record that's played on repeat, but not broken. Tommy finds that he couldn't get tired of Phil's laugh. The man does it a lot, but it's nothing close to annoying.

(In some distant way, it reminds him of better times, back in the Complex, when everything was normal).

He shakes the thought from his head.

"Are bitch boys one and two home to decorate, then?" he asks, glancing out the window to watch the streetlights overhead pass by, illuminating them for a couple of seconds as they drive underneath it.

"Wil's home, but Tech's out tonight," Phil responds, fingers tapping against the steering wheel.

"Oh I see how it is. I don't come over for a while and the first time I do, he's got plans with his *other* friends," Tommy complains, a frown crossing his face. He'd hoped to hear another Greek story from the guy tonight, but it's not like he's bitter about it or anything. Everyone has other friends. Just to make sure Phil hasn't got the wrong idea, he tacks on, "Well, good. I'm glad he's not home. In fact, I hope he stays with them. Didn't want to see that bitch anyways."

"He'll be back in the morning, Toms," Phil says, something fond in his tone, glancing over to the passenger seat, where Tommy's begun to curl up against the window.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Tommy waves his hand towards the guy, head resting against the window, "Tell him to stay there, Phil. He's a wrong'un."

Phil reaches over, carefully turning down the radio, "I'll let him know."

Tommy hums, letting his eyes slip close. "Thank you. You truly are the biggest man."

----

"...he looks so peaceful, Phil..." A voice is talking overhead, pretty close to his ear, but far enough that it's not too disturbing.

Tommy's eyebrows pull together, nose scrunching up.

He's too tired to wake up fully-- and it's pretty warm in Phil's car, anyways-- but there is some weird light shining against his eyelids. It's annoying.

"He fell asleep just like that, not even ten minutes after we left the bakery," Phil's voice responds, keeping his tone quiet, "I didn't want to wake him up. Looked like he needed the sleep, anyways."

The other voice hums, bordering between amusement and fondness.

"I'll just carry him, then," They say, only to tack on, "Just like old times. Remember?"

There's a gentle smacking sound, hand against fabric, and the other voice winces without any true pain behind it.

"I'm only joking, Phil, jeez. It's not like he's awake to hear me, anyways." they comment, and Tommy almost laughs at the evident grimace in their tone.

"I doubt he'd even remember that in the first place. He was pretty out of it, poor kid." they continue with a huff, and Tommy can feel arms reaching down and slinking gently underneath his knees. He would fight whoever is trying to pick him up right now, maybe bite them, but... he's exhausted. Working for a full day after taking a couple days break really did a number on him.

Tommy can feel himself being lifted up further, his head lulling against a warm and very familiar chest. There's a gentle brush of chill wind against the side of his face not tucked into this person's jumper, causing him to nestle further into the warmth.

Maybe his reputation will go down after this, but sue him. He's missed this, whatever it is.

"We can't take the chance, you know that." Phil responds.

*"Blah blah blah. That's what you sound like, Phil."* The other voice mocks, and then Tommy's jostled lightly. He makes an indignant noise in his half-sleep, half-awake limbo, eyebrows pinching. Fuck whoever is holding him, he thinks. He just wants to rest.

"Wil." Phil hisses, taking on that tone when he's only minorly partially upset. Tommy's never seen him really upset except for that one day (he fears the day that ever happens again).

Wait a minute.

Tommy's eyes snap open, immediately catching sight of the man standing over him.

It's Wilbur, in all of his emo closeted-poet glory, curls spilling over very tired eyes.

(Tommy makes a mental note to question just how exhausted Wilbur looks later- for now, the pure excitement of being here, with him- with his older brother).

"Wil?" he croaks out, his chest feeling light as he looks up at the man who is now positively beaming down at him.

"Good morning, sunshine," Wilbur whispers, and *oh, stars*, Tommy's missed him. Not just him, but all of them. This; being together with a family, *in* a family for the first time.

As if reading his mind, Wilbur leans his head down, pressing his forehead to Tommy's for a second in a way that's so disgustingly familial that it makes the kid think for a few moments that this is his *biological* brother.

"We meet again, kiddo," Wilbur grins, moving back so that he can jostle Tommy higher into his arms and begin trekking towards the house. "I told you we would, remember? I've missed you, you know. That whole getting sick thing? Quit that."

*We meet again.* God, it takes all of Tommy's strength not to potentially sob at that remark.

That was the thing Wilbur had said to him the last time Tommy stayed over. A quiet but genuine promise that they would see each other again, even though Tommy was more than convinced that they wouldn't.

Shoving away his emotions, Tommy rolls his eyes, ignoring the way his heart's warming significantly. "As if I can control getting sick, you dickhead."

Wilbur hums, jostling the boy again but with more force this time to make Tommy squawk, instinctively reaching up to wrap his arms around the man's neck. Asshole.

"Fuck you, don't- I just woke up, you asshole, don't do that." Tommy seethes, turning towards Phil, who has already made it to the front door before them. "Philll, Phil, don't leave me with this fucking maniac."

"I'd say you're just fine with said maniac, seeing as how you're holding on to him and all," Phil responds, unlocking the front door with a *click* and tossing him a smug look.

Tommy's face drops, immediately letting go of Wilbur's neck and resorting to trying to scramble out of his grasp, kicking his feet out and ignoring the hisses of pain the elder lets out at being kicked in the gut.

"Fucking- actual gremlin child- I'm letting you down, I'm letting you down, fucking hell."

----

"This is so dumb," Tommy groans, leaning his head back against the sofa cushions. "Why can't we just do something fun, like stay motionless on the sofa and watch Youtube? Or horror movies?"

Wilbur blinks, setting down one of the big bins labeled 'Ornaments' atop the coffee table.

"You don't like decorating?" he asks, clicking the things holding the bin's lid down and lifting it off.

"No? Only fucking weirdos like you enjoy decorating," Tommy says, throwing his hands in the air. Then he adds in a lower tone, bitterness taking on an edge to it, "Christmas is stupid, too."

"Aww, what's your prejudice against Christmas about?" Wilbur questions, picking out a bright pink ornament from the bin and holding it up.

Tommy makes a face at it, turning away.

"Just think it's dumb," he says, shrugging. "What's the point of it, really?"

"Free presents?"

Tommy scoffs, shaking his head.

"That's dumb."

"Spending time with family?" Wilbur suggests, hanging the ornament on the Christmas tree near the fireplace, and Tommy's nose scrunches further in disgust.

"I don't even have to say why *that's* stupid," he grumbles, pulling his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them, leaning against the arm of the sofa.

Wilbur just hums, pulling another ornament from the bin— a crystal candy cane— and tapping his temple curiously.

There's silence for a moment, with only fire crackling and Wilbur's constant humming filling the ambience (some song Tommy can't recognize, but certainly not one of those dumb Christmas jingles he's forced to listen to in every shop).

"Tommy," the man turns to him again, "Can you help me hang this up? I can't find the right spot for it on the tree."

"Who the fuck cares where it goes?" Tommy asks, plopping his chin onto his hand now, his elbow propped against the arm of the sofa, "It's just decorations, it's nothing special."

Wilbur snorts, pausing for a moment to cough into the crook of his elbow.

He'd been doing that frequently since Tommy had come over. Maybe he's contracting a cold, too. Phil had mentioned earlier that Wilbur was getting over some nasty flu as well, so maybe he's still got it.

Tommy makes sure to shift away from him slightly. No way in hell does he want to get sick again, especially not from *this* idiot.

"My mum would have your head for that, you know," Wilbur comments once he's cleared his throat, patting a hand against his chest, "She's always very precise when she decorates."

"Yeah, well, get someone who can actually decorate to help you, then." Tommy grumbles.

"I'm trying to." Wilbur says, head tilting towards the boy expectantly, watching as he just curls further in on himself.

"I don't decorate, asshole," he responds, although it's not exactly true. "'S not my thing."

Back during Christmastime at the Complex, Tommy was always put on "decorating duty" along with a couple other heroes. He'd surround the intern's desks with holly and jingle bells, help George decorate the massive Christmas tree that stood in their shared apartment at the very top of the Complex... all of it.

He wasn't exactly bad at it, either.

(He only got "bad" at decorating when he grew older and progressively lost interest and hope in the "magical flying man" that brought presents to good children. Fuck that guy, actually).

"I'm back," Phil calls, entering the room carrying a tray with multiple mugs and wearing—oh, yikes.

"Phil, what the actual fuck are you wearing?" Tommy whispers, staring at Phil's outfit in pure disgust.

"It's my ugly Christmas sweater- it's traditional when we're decorating to wear one." Phil responds, setting the tray of mugs on the coffee table where the bin isn't sat. His sweater's emerald green and decorated in those little white Pom-poms and red ribbons.

It's abhorred, really.

"Phil, you appall me." Tommy announces, earning a loud snort from Wilbur, who's turned around to grab one of the mugs from off the table.



"Careful what you say, Toms. I just might poison your hot chocolate next time." Phil jokes, taking a seat on the sofa and grabbing his own mug.

"You wouldn't, though," Tommy tells him, feeling a prick of deja vu at his own words.

"Oh really?" Phil raises his eyebrows, taking a long slurp from his mug before tacking on, "Why wouldn't I?"

Tommy shrugs, feigning ignorance as he leans forwards to grab the last mug on the tray, "I'm your biggest source of income at Eldritch Wings. Kill me and you'll find yourself in the gray areas of Manberg, mate. Bye bye, Philza Craft, hello Tommy Innit."

There's a pause.

"Do you ever think about what you're saying before you say it?" Wilbur questions, settling down on the sofa beside Tommy, barely hiding a smirk when the boy instinctively inches closer to him.

"Nope," Tommy responds, popping the 'p,' "I'm a constant fountain of knowledge, Wilbur, what use am I if I don't share it all?"

----

Wilbur's glaring at him.

Harshly.

Tommy glares right back.

"I'm not going to help you," he states matter of factly.

"I'm not asking for help," Wilbur responds, taking on the same tone as Tommy.

Ah, the classic 'reverse psychology' technique.

Two can play at that game.

"Well, good. Because I'm not gonna help you," Tommy responds, leaning back into the sofa cushions.

Phil had long since left the room, leaving Tommy alone with this asshole.

He'd been going on about how the "backyard had to be decorated as well," which in Tommy's opinion, was plain bullshit. Nobody sees the backyard, why did that have to be decorated?

Then again, Dream had once been an avid decorator of their little room when only four or so people were inhabiting it.

They'd get into arguments frequently about that as Tommy grew older and far more apprehensive to decorating— to celebrating Christmas in general, really.

"Hmm," Wilbur hums, leaning against the fireplace, his expression full of thought.

He's way too close to the fireplace, though, and Tommy's certain that one push could send the fucker sprawling right into the flames.

(It would've been funny, if not for recent events).

"Hmm," Tommy mocks the guy, clicking his tongue, "What're you thinking about over there?"

It's a stupid thing to ask, really— but Tommy's long since realized he has no self preservation. He will get himself into the worst of situations, including social interaction.

"When you say you don't decorate," Wilbur begins, dusting his hand against the rim of the fireplace, which has now been decorated with holly (thanks to Phil), "Do you mean that you've never decorated for Christmas before, or do you actually not like decorating?"

Tommy exhales a gust of air, thinking about how he should go about responding to this.

Really, he could just lie- he's done that before, plenty of times, but...

This was Wilbur, and lying to Wilbur was difficult somehow.

He's more of an open book around the man than he's been around anyone else in his life and that terrifies him more than anything.

"I just don't really like Christmas in general, big man," Tommy mumbles, picking at a loose thread on his cardigan, "I've decorated before, loads of times, and it's fine, y'know, but the holiday fuckin' sucks."

"I get that," Wilbur says, so simply that Tommy raises his eyebrows at the guy- him, Wilbur Soot, lover of all things that resemble the closest amount of unbridled nostalgia and gold wrapped into words- understands hatred for a holiday? "I remember a couple Christmases ago, my mum got sick. Really sick. I was by her bedside for days, telling her all about my day, all of that- but she still somehow was all excited for Christmas, as if she wasn't bedridden. Told me that if she got out of bed and the whole house wasn't still decorated, she'd kick my ass."

Tommy snorts despite himself.

"Your mum sounds like a great person," he says, and Wilbur smiles distantly.

"She is," Wil responds, before shaking his head, a way of returning to reality, "But she wouldn't appreciate it if she comes home in January and our house doesn't have Christmas decorations up and all that."

"You leave the decorations up through January?" Tommy asks, unsure if he feels appalled by this fact or not. Usually the decorations at the Complex were down by, at the latest, midnight of the twenty-seventh in preparation for the New Year's ceremony.

"Yep! Sort of a tradition in the Craft family, I guess."

"That's far better than those horrible jumpers."

Wilbur shrugs, "I try telling Phil that every year, but he never listens. Traditions are a big thing here. We like sticking to them."

Tommy shudders.

It feels like there was more to that sentence, but he can't quite put his finger on it.

Wilbur leaves his spot by the fireplace, backing away to take a better look at the Christmas tree from a distance. It's pretty much all decorated now, from what Tommy can see. There's ornaments decorating it all the way to the top (now he can see why Wilbur's usually the one elected to decorate it, the tall fucking prick).

"Something's missing," Wilbur says, glaring at the tree, hand against his chin, eyebrows pulled together the way he does when he's thinking.

"Other than the star?" Tommy questions, eyeing the top of the tree, where he'd normally find a gigantic star that glows of green- Dream always did like that colour, after all.

Wilbur waves his hand, "The star always comes last, that's obvious- no, I mean something else..."

The man pauses for a moment, frown increasing, and then he turns back to the bin, beginning to dig through it. He pulls out different cardboard sets of ornaments, setting them to the side before leaning his whole torso into the bin. Tommy wonders if he might end up falling in, comically, like they do in the animated television shows. Maybe he should just push him in... nah, maybe not. He'll give him a break in honour of not helping him decorate.

Huffing, Tommy glances back at the tree and, now that he's looking at it, it *does* look a bit bare.

He can't really put his finger on what's wrong with it, but there is something missing, just as Wilbur had said.

Tommy's still trying to figure out what could possibly be missing when Wilbur lets out a loud, "*Oh my fucking Gods*" and pulls his head out from the bin, face pulled down in a mix of irritation and disappointment.

"Have you found it?" Tommy asks, leaning forwards to try and look over the edge of the bin, but the man stands up straight, pulling out a string of lights with him.

Tommy snorts immediately.

Of *course* that's what had been missing. It's only the primary thing that goes on a tree.

"Wil," Tommy begins, feeling purely elated at this sudden occurrence, "Wil, mate, you do know that you're supposed to put that on the tree first, right?"

"Don't," Wilbur hisses darkly, still holding the lights in his hands, mouth pressed into a thin line.

"I can't believe this. You, Wilbur Soot, Mr. I-Decorate-The-Tree-Every-Year, has made such a beginner's mistake," Tommy continues, not even trying to hide the shit-eating grin on his face. "This is awesome. I can't wait until Techno gets home so I can tell him—"

A hand clamps over his mouth, Wilbur leaning close to his face, glaring daggers right into his eyes.

"If you tell anyone," he begins, and his tone is sharp (but nothing like Tommy has ever heard; it's full of teasing, of light at the edges, and he can't help but feel a tad relieved), "They'll never find your body."

Tommy rolls his eyes.

Was it just another Craft family tradition to threaten people or something?

Instead of tactically kicking the man in the shins— like he should've done— Tommy licks his hand. The shriek that the man lets out makes it worth it.

----

Tommy grins up at the Christmas tree, arms crossed over his chest.

He and Wilbur had spent the last hour wrapping the lights around the tree— very, very carefully— with the ornaments still on. It had cost Tommy about half of his life, he's certain,

and by the looks of Wilbur's crumpled form on the floor, it had taken more of his than Tommy's.

"You're getting old," he comments, just to kick the guy while he's still down, and he earns a middle finger.

Tommy turns back to the tree, now examining it in a sort of new light.

He'd decorated it, in a sort of way.

If you looked at it from an outsider's perspective, the only thing he'd really done was help Wilbur wrap the multicoloured Christmas lights around the already decorated limbs, but he still considers that "decorating."

The only thing it's missing now is that stupid ass green star sitting at the very top.

"You're missing the star, you know," he says, turning his head to look at Wilbur, who has rolled over onto his side and is staring at the tree from a good distance away.

"I know," Wilbur responds, getting to his feet with a huff, coughing into the crook of his elbow again a couple of times. "I told you, that's always the last piece."

"Obviously. What sense does it make to put the star on first?"

Wilbur shrugs, "Some people do it differently, kiddo. It just depends on your family."

Tommy's chest clenches. There it is again. *Kiddo*. God, he hates everyone.

It was the same feeling he got when Sam called and Phil called him 'kiddo' as well. Awful, really.

There's no word for the emotion, not one he can really place, but...

He's missed them.

All of them, honestly.

It's hitting him all at once just how much he's truly missed being around them. It's overwhelming, it's *warm*. Tommy hates it and cherishes it at the same time. There are rare moments in which he feels this sort of warmth; times where he's huddled up to the fireplace back at Nook's to try and staunch the ice filling his veins when really, all Sam would have to do is shoot him a proud grin and he'd collapse. It's awful, and it's familial.

"Yeah, well," Tommy coughs a bit, mostly to cover up how he's suddenly feeling as though he might keel over, "You might as well put the star on now so that the tree doesn't look all unfinished n' shit."

Wilbur hums, turning to fish around through one of the other bins.

It's one set closer to the tree, one that Tommy hadn't gotten the chance to actually look through yet, despite his growing curiosity (and opposition) to its existence.

"I would put it up, but I just so happen to be a tad shorter than the very tip top of the tree," he responds simply, standing up straight and dusting off a star.

This one's golden, very unlike the illuminated green one back in the Complex.

It almost looks as though it's made of solid gold and, considering the mansion that the family lives in, Tommy wouldn't be surprised if it was.



Swallowing his questions, Tommy instead argues, "That's bullshit. You're like, the same height as the tree, Wil."

He glances between the tree and the top of Wilbur's head, and, well... it was true, Wil wasn't *quite* as tall as the tree, but he was getting there (and his arms were certainly long enough to put the star up there).

"Mm, not really, though," Wilbur says, before smiling warmly, holding the gold star up, "I do have an idea on how to get it up there, though."

Tommy raises an eyebrow, not quite liking the smug look on Wilbur's face.

It clicks as soon as Wilbur kneels down to the floor, arms stretched out behind him- an invitation, one that Tommy would probably normally take, if it didn't entail his inevitable doom.

"No," he holds his hands out, even though Wilbur can't see him, "I'm not doing that shit. Absolutely not."

"Aw, come on, Tommy," Wilbur pouts, turning his head. Tommy narrows his eyes. "Alright, fine. How's this, then? I'll make you another mug of hot chocolate if you help me out with this one thing."

Well, shit. Wilbur knows exactly what he's doing.

"That's fucked up." Tommy grumbles, already standing up from the sofa.

"What's fucked up?" Wilbur asks, the corner of his mouth twitching.

Tommy glares at him. "Die."

"It'll be fun, Toms," Wilbur continues to insist, before adding, "and I won't drop you. I promise."

"That just makes it sound like you *are* going to drop me."

"I won't, I won't! Come on, for me? I was sick recently, won't you help out a poor wee lad?"

Tommy pauses, thinking- but exhales.

He walks over, muttering obscenities under his breath, before settling onto Wilbur's shoulders.

"I hope you crumble under my weight and fall into the fireplace." he deadpans as the man stands up straight, gripping his hair so that he doesn't fall off.

"Quit pulling my hair, you actual gremlin." Wilbur complains, completely ignoring Tommy's comment.

"No, I want you to suffer. I'm like Remy from Ratatouille. I'm in control, bitch."

The man huffs, holding up the star, "Will you just put the star on the tree so we can snap a photo for Kristin, you insolent child?"

Tommy hums, turning the star over in his hands.

It's strangely heavy, but then again-- probably solid gold.

"Is Kristin your mum?"

"Great guess," Wilbur comments sarcastically, shifting a bit from underneath Tommy's weight, "Now put it on the tree, will you?"

"Am I too heavy for you or something?"

"No, I just fear for my safety every second more that you're up there."

Fair enough.

"Fine, alright," Tommy reaches out towards the tree, holding the star out. He carefully balances himself on Wilbur's shoulders, tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth, gently placing the star atop the tree. "There, I did it. Happy now?"

"Very," Wilbur muses, sounding particularly excited about something.

Tommy decides to ignore it; always a bad decision.

"Right, now will you put me down?"

"Mm, in a second," Wilbur turns suddenly, facing with their backs to the tree. "Smile for the camera."

Tommy blinks, and then there's a blinding flash, followed by Phil's large grin and stupidass Christmas jumper standing in the doorway of the living room.

A silent pause follows, filled mostly with Phil's chuckling and Tommy's internal suffering.

"I hope that your house goes up in flames," he tells them cheerily. "I want all of your stupid decorations to burn."

"There's the Christmas spirit," Wilbur jokes, earning a knee to the face.

----

Wilbur shuts the bedroom door gently behind him, waiting for the little 'click' before turning to Phil.

"He's lying to us," he tells him immediately, keeping his voice hushed despite how much he just wants to shout. "He's got to be, right? He's- it's either that, or he's being hurt back at home. What kind of child doesn't like decorating- or is bitter about holidays?"

Phil winces, gripping his forearms.

"It's definitely strange," he confirms, eyes flitting to the shut door to the guest bedroom for only a moment, "Every family is different, though. Maybe his just has—"

"He told me that his mother was *dead*, Phil," Wilbur insists, reaching out to take his father by the forearms, as if threatening to shake some sense into him. "It could've just been a slip-up or something, but he literally implied to me that his mother wasn't alive anymore, and then told us that his parents— keyword, 'parents,' plural— were on a business trip."

"You think that he's lying about... having parents, or his parents caring?" Phil asks slowly, scanning Wilbur's face.

Phil would be lying if he said that he wasn't constantly worried for the kid.

Working two part-time jobs with hardly any breaks, living in a musty old apartment without even a sign of parents, sleeping on a broken sofa... the list could go on.

"I think he hasn't got any," Wilbur admits, face falling a tad when he says it aloud.

It was one thing, theorizing about this sort of thing, but saying it out loud was something else entirely; it was almost as though you were confirming it to your own ears, to the universe itself.

Phil looks at the shut door again, and... it makes sense.

An orphaned kid, left all on his own, working to make a living, stick-thin, terrified of walking home alone.

What *doesn't* make sense is how this has even been allowed.

Tommy doesn't look eighteen to the untrained eye. Hell, Phil had been apprehensive the day Tommy applied for the job about him being his true age, but the kid had been so excited about getting the job...

(Plus, he was pretty short-staffed at the time, with both sons refusing to work for him).

"What do you say we do about it, then?" Phil whispers, looking at Wilbur again, who has let go of his father's arms, face heavy with grieving that didn't belong to him.

Phil already has a good idea of what Wilbur wants to do. His son tended to grow attached too quickly, too harshly. The kid *does* have an emerald already, after all.

However, what they *should* do and what they *want* to do are both on opposite sides of the spectrum.

Wilbur bites his lower lip, thinking for a moment. He probably knows this as well, potentially conflicted with the want to just adopt Tommy on the spot, or find him a better life elsewhere. In truth— and as much as it bothers Phil to think about— Tommy wouldn't be safe with them. They'd try to protect him, try to make his life as normal as possible, but he'd learn about who they are at some point.

Phil inhales, rubbing the space between his eyes to coax his headache away. That isn't something he should think about. It isn't going to happen. Tommy wouldn't want to stay with them, anyways, he doesn't think. That's perfectly fine and understandable as well, of course. Tommy didn't know them much, and they didn't know *him* that much, even if they'd like to think that they do.

Shaking his head, Phil turns back to Wilbur, whose eyes are still untrained in deep thought. It's almost funny, in some strange way, to know that Wilbur can't decide on this type of thing. There's rarely been a time where the man's looked more conflicted.

Wilbur was never the best at making decisions, but with these types of situations, he was quick to the answer; to the punchline.

This time is different.

Phil knows that.

He's not exactly surprised, either, when the answer that Wilbur comes up with is a simple whispered, "*I don't know.*"

----

The air's heavy with dust and ash.

Techno presses the gas mask— a rather nice substitute for his boar mask in these desperate times— closer to his face, clicking his flashlight on and surveying the area.

The Banquet hall was the same as he'd seen it before promptly leaving, minus the whole building being on fire and falling apart.

It looked a lot like one of those abandoned buildings Tubbo would be interested in now, and his chest stings a tad at the thought of the kid. He'd gotten word that both Ranboo and Tubbo had made it out of the event alive. They were vague in their message and he hadn't seen them in person since, but it was still relieving to know that they were okay.

He steps carefully over a broken wine glass, barely giving it a second glance.

He's here for one thing, and one thing only— *information*.

Some sort of intel, really.

He needs to know how it happened, what went down, the planning that had gone into it, the people behind it; anything and as much as he can possibly gather.

Techno had spoken to a few people in his network about the event— most just as angry as he was— but not many had any clue of what could've happened.

The majority, really, were just shocked at the host's actions as Phil had seemed to be.

Although Techno personally had never encountered the demon hybrid beforehand, apparently plenty others had— including Niki, who Techno trusted despite her being a vigilante— and had appraised the dude for once being kind. Overly kind, actually, the type of *overly kind* that runs a once-functioning muffin bakery into the dirt.

Techno's suspicions are this; that the host was still bitter over the loss of his business and was taking it out on others, although it really wasn't much of a reasoning. Surely there had to be something else, some other strange motive for wanting to blow up half of Manberg to hell and back.

Sure, losing one's job can be devastating, but Techno couldn't help but think this was something entirely bigger. There is no doubt in his mind that there was more people behind it than just Bad and the one person who'd called himself Daedalus.

Techno steps farther into the hall, taking care to maneuver around broken glass and splintered wood. If he could find something— anything really— that would give him insight on what might've happened, then he'd be set.

Techno was a tracker, known for it; it came with the hybrid traits.

(Wilbur was a far better tracker than he was, but he couldn't exactly help while bedridden).

Techno hums under his breath, bending low beneath an overhang, stepping into the room where it'd all happened; the banquet hall itself, where the once beautifully set table was now turned over, glasses and napkins strewn about.

It was almost disappointing that he hadn't gotten to try the food that day. In a weird way, he'd been looking forward to it, even though he'd been pretty positive that the night would only end up going terribly.

He steps closer to the end of the hall, where he could recall the demon hybrid having sat.

Techno pauses, then frowns, bending down.

There was something there, like a presence had begun to grow out of nowhere.



Curling around the cushions of the tall chair, glowing ever so slightly in the moonlight flooding in from broken windows, was greenery.

It was far different than anything Techno had ever seen, but it did look vaguely familiar.

Almost like Nether roots have begun to grow here, lightly glowing a green colouring rather than a crimson red, as most of the vines and plants within the Depths did.

The very sight of it made him feel sick and he backed away a couple paces. He hadn't seen this sort of thing before and certainly had never come across Nether roots in the Overworld.

Another weird thing about these roots— if that's what they even are— is that they only seemed to be right there. It's as if they'd appeared in the cushions where the host had once sat. In some weird way, Techno had a feeling that they were still growing— as if they were slowly multiplying, starting here.

Techno turns away from the sight, pulling out his phone and steadying himself against a wall.

"Phil," he mutters into the receiver, glancing over his shoulder, "I think I've found something."

## Chapter End Notes

whoops looks like they're gaining a braincell now. that's not good lmao

sidenote- what tommy's saying about christmas comes from a place of trauma. i personally like decorating for christmas, but i'm not a big fan of the holiday itself due to past experiences (: i hope everyone had happy holidays, but if you didn't, know that you are loved and not alone<3

oh my god? 6k kudos? that's literally insane /pos,,, i'm . i cannot physically  
comprehend that number, thank u guys sm :(( and ??? 180k hits? i'm digging my grave  
but in a slash pos way<33

# **shattered soul, speak your truth (who am i, who are you?)**

## Chapter Summary

A boy breathes in, breathes out-- and then he's moving on impulse.

There's a hand around the doorknob and in one thought and the next, Tommy's outside of a bedroom just down the hall, a hand poised to knock on the door. It takes a moment before something clicks and his breath catches in his throat.

He pauses, one second, two, and then knocks.

There's barely a moment that passes before the door's opening, a slightly disheveled Wilbur appearing on the threshold, glasses askew on his nose.

or, tommy is not okay. wilbur tries to help

## Chapter Notes

twos; heavy derealization/dissociation, panic attacks, losing feeling in limbs, self deprecation thoughts, mentions/implied emetophobia, implied/referenced child abuse, mentioned near character death.

this chapter's a really heavy one, please mind the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are times when Tommy doesn't know who he is.

It's like this: on some days, he is a citizen, one tossed onto the streets of a city with only the knowledge that kept him alive in the days he was not one.

On other days, he's whatever the people around him want him to be.

With Sam, he's an employee. A hardworking fifteen year old that tries his best to work another day without collapsing. He's a closed book; boisterous and loud, a friendly 'customer is always right' grin that disappears as soon as the store's empty. (He's the boy that collapsed in the backroom of the bakery a month after his employment from exhaustion but was picked back up again, greeted with no reprimand, just a calming smile).

With Quackity though, he's the former hero Theseus. It's with him that he is, or at least is seen as bent and broken, a splintered piece of wood or a misshapen drain pipe. The very anguished child-- traumatized, but apathetic-- that Quackity had picked up that day from underneath the snow just a block away from the Hero Complex, leaning up against a dumpster in the alleyway, half dead.

It's when Tommy's alone, however, that he truly has no clue who he is.

A part of him sings the name *Theseus*; the whispering of a phoenix reborn in the flames of desire and revenge, set forth with a gentle nudge to bring carnage towards everyone that wronged him.

Another part, however, one that grows stronger and stronger every day he breathes, whispers a gentle *Tommy*, or a fond and amused *Toms*. It's this part that he can't quite fathom; the one of hair ruffles and fingers pressing softly against the underside of his jaw, as though trying to be as careful with him as they would be with porcelain.

(And he is fragile, he figures; a fractured mirror, burst into a million pieces, each fragment showing a different form of himself wherever he looks).

There are nights where Tommy lays awake, arms wrapped around himself and fingernails catching underneath the threads of his layers of shirts, forcing every choked sob that dares to burn up his throat away because he doesn't know what he is, nor who. The constant nightmares only serve to make it worse; the painful feeling of every anguish balancing atop his shoulders, hot like an iron rod against his spine (even if he knows it's supposed to be cold).

Like the spindles ticking on a clock, it is the same dream that comes to him each night.

He's always back there, standing on the edge of the Complex's Tower, a hand clutching his chest and another positioned to reach out for the man in front of him- a person that was supposed to be his best friend, his *brother*. Every time, he begs for mercy, begs that he's done nothing wrong— and he asks why.

(Sometimes, he asks *who*, even if he knows the answer).

It ends the same way every time, the way it happened back then-- there's a hand pressing against his chest, and he half expects (hopes, rather) that he's being accepted. Pulled back into the arms of his best friend, being welcomed and shrouded away from the snow, granted mercy.

Tommy knows it doesn't truly end like that.

It will never end that way.

He'll always fall, for that is what he's fated to be-- and yet, no matter how often the nightmare repeats, no matter how often he'll fall from the Tower and wake up in a cold sweat, he'll always hope.

Hope that the hand, one day, will pull him forwards instead of push him backwards; will grant him warmth instead of the blistering cold that falls below.

(He may have saved himself that day, but there is always a time to die).

The nightmares don't stop, no matter how much liquid nighttime Benadryl he drinks, or how often he's on the phone with Quackity, begging for 'something stronger.'

Even if he slept for a thousand years, he'd be plagued with them always.

Tonight, similar to every other night, Tommy dreams again.

Like a broken record, instead of waking up to cold, he wakes up to warmth.

The warmth, though, isn't as comforting as it should be. The spare bedroom's bed sheets and comforter stick to him with the sweat that typically sends a shiver up his spine back home. Here, though, where things are heated and rich, it's overwhelming; there's a wave of heavy heat being sent across his forehead, sweat beading just at his hairline and dripping from his jawbone.

This... he isn't sure if this is better than the cold. It feels just as restricting— just as nauseating.

Tommy sits up in the bed and immediately he can feel the symptoms of a panic attack on the rise; the way his stomach churns, nausea and motion sickness making their vile appearances. Bitter bile rises in his throat, similar to an omen of death- a promise that his night (and day that follows) will be hell.

His fingers twist into the comforter. Another sign; the uncontrollable teeth chatter and when he raises one hand to put it against his chest (to make sure his heart's still beating), it's shaking violently.

Tossing the blankets off of his legs, Tommy slowly reaches out to balance himself against the bedside table. His legs feel as numb as the rest of his body, sweat glistening and cold against the base of his neck. The clothes he'd worn here, a heavily threaded shirt and soft sweater, are soaked in it.

Despite how difficult it is to find the energy to help himself-- to take showers, to brush his teeth, to do anything that is deemed "normal"-- he can't take the feeling of the sweat pressed against his skin, sticking to his jumper. There was a word for this feeling, certainly, but he wasn't smart (no matter how long he'd convinced himself he was, scouring over every novel in the Complex for endless hours).

Tommy breathes, slowly, picking at the heavy sleeves that once felt comfortable and now feel like syrup has been pressed underneath.

Carefully, he tries to move his foot— it's still working, somehow, and he shakily steps against the floorboards.

(Tommy knows that if he doesn't move or act quickly, that his feet will stop working— that he'll end up on the floor, shaking uncontrollably all by himself, with no saving grace except the morning hues of morning).

He stands up straight now, taking another step, the wood barely creaking beneath his feet. In an attempt to regain balance on legs that don't want to work, Tommy stumbles through the dark bedroom.

The bile in his throat grows progressively worse, making him feel as though he'd run a mile the day before. It's awful, the way his head spins, the feeling of everything pressing against his back, forcing him to feel on the verge of death.

It's painful and draining all at once.

Violently, Tommy pulls the sweaty jumper off over his head and tosses it to the other side of the room, uncaring that he'd have to find it the day after. It's a lot cooler now with it gone with just the undershirt sticking to him.

(He thanks the stars that it isn't too cold, though, despite the frost that grows on the window just to his right).

Things feel unreal, dizzy, almost, as though he hadn't woken up from his dream.

He raises a shaking hand to press against the cool of the wall, feeling the grooves in it, the plaster underneath the pads of his fingertips. He runs his hand along it until he reaches the doorframe, and he closes his eyes, inhaling deeply.

*Who are you?* he wonders.

No answer comes, and he opens his eyes.

A boy breathes in, breathes out-- and then he's moving on impulse.

There's a hand around the doorknob and in one thought and the next, Tommy's outside of a bedroom just down the hall, a hand poised to knock on the door. It takes a moment before something clicks and his breath catches in his throat.

He pauses, one second, two, and then knocks.

There's barely a moment that passes before the door's opening, a slightly disheveled Wilbur appearing on the threshold, glasses askew on his nose. The lights are off in his room but the moonlight floods in through opaque drapes pulled away from the large bay window.

Tommy can barely register it.

All he sees is the person in front of him- his brother, somehow, someway.

Wilbur; the enigma, in every way and another.

If there was someone that Tommy couldn't pick apart like one of his favourite Greek stories Techno tells him of, that person was Wilbur.

He was odd, to put it lightly, but he was *kind*. There was nothing fake in his sweet grins, in the way he ruffled Tommy's hair, in the funny jokes that he shared with him, in the way he *spoke* to him. There was always something genuine about how he'd brighten when Tommy



came into the room, how he'd deemed him his "little brother" hardly a week after they'd officially met.

To the untrained eye, Wilbur was just what he looked and acted as: a withdrawn poet, a creator of words and music who probably spends his free time locked away in his room.

To Tommy, he was something else: a book with missing pages, a poet's best soliloquy with lost words.

"Tommy?" Wilbur breathes, voice tangible, something for Tommy to hold on to. There's a hand reaching out towards him, one grasping the frame of the door, the other twitching in his direction. The man blinks, appearing both conflicted and confused, before softening, eyes meeting the way Tommy's shaking, the sound of his teeth chattering louder than the ambience of the house itself.

Tommy doesn't move, doesn't hardly breathe, watching as Wilbur takes in the scene before him, and then there's a gentle sigh.

"Oh, Tommy. Come here, kid." Wilbur whispers into the night, now out stretching both arms, and Tommy's in them almost immediately without a second thought. He presses so hard into the older's jumper that he fears he may suffocate himself.

That small part of him, the one that sings of *Theseus* and *flames* expects to be turned away, but he isn't.

Instantly, arms wrap around him, tight, but not restricting; a hand runs up the back of his curls. Something pulls him forwards, into the room, and then the door shuts gently with a *click*.

Tommy hardly hears it over the tsunami pouring through his ears, over the sounds of Wilbur's confused whispering.

"Tommy, are you alright? Are you sick- hurt? Injured?" Wilbur's whispering over and over, now pulling away a tad so that he can run his hands over Tommy's cheeks, eyebrows pinched in worry. He doesn't look the slightest bit as though he'd been asleep- sure, exhaustion clings to him the way it follows Tommy's every step, but it isn't quite there, not the way Tommy feels. "Jesus, kid, you're- you're burning up. Have you got a fever again?"

Tommy makes a noise, halfway between a whine and any words that can get past his teeth chattering, and Wilbur freezes, shaking his head.

"Alright, alright," Wilbur whispers, eyes searching the boy in the night. He gives in after a moment, intertwining their fingers, "Come sit down with me then, yeah? Over here- I'll guide you- I promise you won't bump into anything. You're okay, man. You're alright."

Tommy leans into the man's side, pressing as tightly as he can, his entire body shaking all over. His foot won't stop tapping against the floor, his hands won't stop flailing about- he can hardly breathe, and everything's suffocating, but there's also Wilbur.

Wilbur, who sits beside him and holds his hands gently in his, who is whispering reassurances into the dark. It's Wilbur who is letting go of Tommy's hand to rub circles into his back, much like a concerned parent would to a crying child. It's him who is promising him that it's going to be alright, who is guiding him through breathing exercises, carefully dragging him back to reality.

"Do you want to talk about what's going on, Toms?" Wilbur asks quietly, hand still rubbing circles into Tommy's back. Eyebrows are furrowed and he scans the boy before him, looking for anything- any sliver of information, any harrowing moment of vulnerability. (There's been plenty of those moments- the little times that Tommy's shown some portion of what he truly is, but Wilbur never listens).

"It's- no," Tommy shakes his head, voice hoarse. It's hard to speak over the way his teeth chatter, and he really just wants to scream, but he doesn't. "I can't."

Wilbur gives him a sad smile, rubbing a hand up and down his back comfortingly. "That's alright. I'm here for you either way, okay? We can just rest or talk then, how'd you like that?"

Pain seizes in Tommy's chest, a sudden grasp of bile in his throat and he nearly keels over. He stretches his fingers out, but his arms feel stiff, like a mannequins'— he opens his jaw but it feels locked shut.

He lets out a pained cry, pressing his palms into his eyes, rough enough to dig them into the sockets.

"Tommy— oh fuck, Tommy, hey, hey," Wilbur's saying, hands reaching out to grasp the boy by the upper arms, his voice bordering on hysterical. "Oh, fuck, shit— hey, you're here, you're okay. Listen to my voice, kiddo, you're doing just fine. I'm with you, you're not alone. Just hear my voice, yeah?"

Tommy shakes his head rapidly, letting out a soft shriek. He hates this feeling— the one of reality fading right at his fingertips, of being taken over by the numb sensation that crawls up his back— of being drawn away by the cold.

"Please," Tommy whispers suddenly, grabbing at Wilbur's jumper, hands weak from shaking. "I can't feel my hands, Wil- I can't- I can't feel my fucking legs, my feet... *I'm so cold.*"

Wilbur makes a noise between a concerned whine and confusion, frantically reaching his hands out to carefully cup Tommy's. His hands are warm, flooding some sort of feeling back into Tommy's hands, but not enough.

"Oh, Tommy," Wilbur's whispering still, sounding on the verge of picking Tommy up and rushing him to the hospital (and he's certain he just might, if Tommy isn't careful). "What's going on with you, kid? You can tell me all about it. I'm always going to be there for you, I'll never hurt you. I just want to know what's going on."

Tommy lets out a choked noise, lowering his face. His heart races, pounding in his ears, in his chest, in his throat.

"I'm not pushing you, Tommy, I promise." Wilbur whispers, giving the boy's hands a gentle squeeze, "I just want to fix it. I want to help you. I'd... I don't know who's hurt you, or- or if that's the case, but I want to help you. If you don't want to say, I completely understand."

It's this, that Tommy feels, is why he can't quite understand the man in front of him.

Wilbur's someone whose words mean something.

Not a poet, sure, but a maker of words- a creator of sentences strung along like popcorn on a string, pieced together just right. Tommy believes he'll never understand Wilbur, but he hopes that maybe, just maybe, Wilbur can understand him.

Unlike Wilbur, though, he can't find the right words— he never truly can— so he just speaks and hopes that it does the trick.

"I had a nightmare," he begins, voice wavering, arms shaking. He can't feel his fingertips and it's making him nervous. He's only had a panic attack like this twice before, and they're the worst of it, besides the times he's genuinely been sick in the toilet or otherwise. "It was so- it was so cold, Wilbur, and everyone was screaming, and I- Wil, I'm..."

It's right there, on the edge of his tongue- his name.

Not the one he wants to be, but the one that died all those months ago, the one that haunts him every step he turns in this fucking city. He can't go anywhere near the Complex, not with the gravestone with 'Theseus' engraved on it standing right in front of him.

His body should be there, buried underneath all that dirt, with all the mourners surrounding it, but it's not.

It's here, it's alive, but it shouldn't be.

"Go on?" Wilbur chides, reaching a hand up to brush a tear from Tommy's eye that he hadn't realized fell.

He wants to say it.

To let his secrets spill, to let himself be held in Wilbur's arms, to never again have to lie- to just be.

But he can't.

"I'm alone." he says weakly, and Wilbur's face falls greatly.

"Oh, *kiddo*," Wilbur whispers, pulling the boy into his arms, leaning his chin on top of Tommy's curls. "You're not alone, Tommy. Never. You have me, you have Phil, you have Techno. Don't forget Niki, or Tubbo. Ranboo, too. We're all right here with you. Always."

There's another pause, and the air grows slightly tense. Tommy does his best to remember how to breathe.

"Can I ask..." the man begins, hesitantly, his hand moving from Tommy's neck to intertwine it with the boy's shivering hands again, "Do you... your parents. Do you uhm... do you really have any?"

Tommy's throat feels dry.

*The truth*, his head whispers, *tell him- he can help you. You can trust him.*

Slowly, reluctantly, Tommy shakes his head.

Wilbur inhales sharply, pressing the boy as close to his chest as physically possible. He lets go of his hands, bringing his arms so tightly around the boy's torso, tight enough that it could be restricting (but it's not, and Tommy can't help but feel as though he was meant to be here).

"Tommy," Wilbur chokes out, voice wavering, as though he's close to crying as well, "Gods, Toms, I'm so fucking sorry- I'm so sorry. I- I know how it must feel, to live back in an empty apartment, without... without parents, or anyone... it must get so lonely."

Tommy can't help but let out a saddened noise. He's certain that if Wilbur draws him any closer, he'll asphyxiate, but he can't find it in himself to care.

"I'm so sorry, kid. I had no idea you were going through that, I- I figured, maybe, but... Tommy, can you listen to me for a moment?"

Tommy lifts his head from Wilbur's chest- just barely so that he's looking into his eyes through the darkness, watching the way his brother crumbles right in front of him.

"I want you to know that this house will always be a home to you. You're never, ever alone- not with me around. As long as I live, as long as in my family shall live, you'll never be alone, Tommy. Phil loves you, Techno loves you, and *I* love you. Do you understand me? We all care about you very much. You're part of our family, biology be damned."

Tommy smiles warily at this, earning a strained one in return from Wilbur. This isn't something that Tommy can understand (not yet, anyways), but he nods as though he does.

## Chapter End Notes

so, that happened i guess? another version of the cat being let out of the bag or whatever, but this time, ruh roh, no parents reveal! what a loser! /j

no but actually please don't kick my ass lmao, i've been veryyy burnt out, but i have like \*glances at docs\* a 10k chapter for u guys at some point!! if i don't disappear or Whatever...

something important real fast: every relationship in this fic is platonic (minus the *very* background relationships like phil & kristin, etc.) i shouldn't even have to say this, but i will: wilbur and tommy are brothers in this fic! wilbur's a bit like a borderline parental figure to tommy, kind of like how sam & phil are to him as well. *absolutely nothing* about their relationship should be taken as romantic. anyone that thinks they or anyone

else in the family dynamic (minus phil & kristin, obviously) are /r disgusts me! shippers dni :) thank you! /all srs

whew okay. if you know me from discord lmao no you don't LOOK AWAY !!!! /j

HUGE massive thank you to my betas for this one,!!!! foxie and swisss I ADORE YOUUUU !!! <333 they helped me very much w this chapter hehe i was Struggling!

# the jokerfication of manberg

## Chapter Summary

Phil exhales, taking a swig of his coffee.

(If Tommy were in here, Wilbur supposes he'd laugh at how much of a 'dad' Phil looks like right now, but he's not- he's outside, and yet, it feels like he isn't even here at all).

"I suppose there's something we can do about that, then," Phil mumbles, flashing Wilbur a 'look,' and he smiles a little.

Wilbur is more than certain that 'something' includes contacting a lawyer.

or, some fluff. shit may or may not happen. i'm sure it's fine

## Chapter Notes

twos// implied/referenced child abuse, talk of panic attacks&derealization, minor talk of sh, guns, violence, blood, and a very very heavy scene near the end of the chap.

if you'd like to skip it, the scene starts at "...and then they laugh, something short and ruined, and Tommy's gut twists..." and then ends at "... Is this what it means to live..."  
!!!

i can give anyone a brief description of what happens in the comments if they'd like;  
remember to stay safe<3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Exhaustion, Tommy thinks, is one of the worst feelings.

It clings to you like a leech, draining all of your energy until you're left with your head hanging, entire form leaning up against any solid thing you can find, whether that's Phil at the breakfast table that morning or the staircase railing on the back patio. (The former incident, however, wasn't exactly on purpose- he sort of just let his eyes droop and, out of nowhere, woke to the sound of an iPhone snapping a photo and Wilbur smirking at him from the other side of the breakfast table).



Tommy was outside now-- definitely not because he was embarrassed for multiple reasons, not just including the Phil situation-- sitting on the back patio of the Craft's household.

The nightmare he'd had the night before still prods at the back of his head, the feeling of every part of him going completely numb, leaving close to no movement left, was something he'd never forget. It's happened to him before, surely, but Tommy can't remember when it did.

(Really, he can't remember much from the times he's supposedly 'panicked.' He couldn't remember the night before all that well, either, besides how awful it had felt to lose all feeling in his hands and feet).

Exhaling, Tommy presses his knees to his chest, chin resting on his crossed arms. His nose is cold, dusted pink with the wind. He hadn't seen the family's backyard before; it was nice, even if it was blanketed in a thick layer of snow that made his skin crawl.

There's a large willow tree, the one that he'd seen the first time he'd visited-- the wood crawling up the bay window upstairs, flooding anyone's vision with twists of tree limbs and nests for birds. It sits in the center of the backyard and, just beyond that, a cedar tree (one that, in Tommy's not so expert opinion, looked as though it was on the verge of dying. The thought sent a shiver up his spine).

The overhang of the willow tree, which had once sported gorgeous greenery, was replaced with white spindles that hung low towards the ground. It was pretty, sure, to anyone else; to Tommy, it just looked like another mystical thing ruined by the snow.

(He did, though, almost laugh at the lights that rounded its trunk; they weren't turned on during the daytime, but he could see the tiny green wiring and bulb lights).

He shifts a bit, rubbing his hands together to try and regain feeling in them.

Wilbur had quite literally forced him to put on a pair of his woolen gloves so he didn't get frostbite, even though Tommy had tried telling him that getting frostbite by just sitting on the

back patio for a couple minutes wasn't really possible. The guy wouldn't hear it, eventually even getting Phil on his side. Annoying, really.

At least he was allowed to sit outside alone; Wilbur had said he wasn't feeling well and went to lay back down on the sofa instead, trying to convince Tommy to nap with him, earning a sharp kick to the shins.

It was nice to be outside all by himself.

Allowed him to think properly without anyone bothering him.

The pure white of the snow is a bit antagonizing, though. It's untouched, clearly fallen in the night, surrounding everything. There's not even a speck of green in sight, except for--

He pauses, eyes widening, watching a butterfly-- as blue as the sky-- flutter down from above his head.

His tongue dries significantly, hand shaking a little as he holds out a finger, watching the butterfly land on the tip. It's nostalgic, in the most bittersweet of ways.

"Well hello there," he whispers, scanning the butterfly and smiling a little, "You're not supposed to be around here, are you?"

The butterfly flutters its wings a bit, as if responding, and Tommy feels as though something's lodged in his throat.

"You and me both, then," he continues to say, lifting his finger a tad to bring the butterfly closer to his face, head tilting, "You know, you guys seem to like me. Butterflies, I mean-- then again, everything likes me, so it's not that surprising. I'm a pretty likeable guy, it's just... well, y'know."

Of course, the butterfly says nothing.

Tommy hums, raising his eyebrows a tad.

"Not a very talkative one, I'm guessing?"

Silence.

"You really should go on home, you know," he tells it, watching the butterfly mournfully, "It's wintertime. It's getting cold- too cold for something as pretty as you. If you got snow on your wings, it could destroy them, you know. You should..."

Tommy pauses.

"You should fly back home to your family," he says, tone hoarse, blinking away any watering to his eyes that he's certain are just a trick of the bristling wind.

He lifts his finger towards the sky, extending it a tad, "Go on now, Clementine. I'll see you in another life, yeah?"

"Are you talking to a butterfly?" A voice interrupts, and Tommy flinches so hard he nearly goes sprawling face-first into the snow, skin crawling with goosebumps. He spins around, trying deliberately to ignore the prick of hurt he feels when Clementine flies away. His eyes meet Techno's, and he narrows them.

"How nice of you to show up," he spits, scanning the man's rumpled form. Dark eyebags cling to him, his shoulders slouched over as if he's been beaten with exhaustion. His hair, which normally looks perfect-- Wilbur always likes having a laugh at that-- is messy, hanging over his shoulder in a very loose braid that he'd probably done in under five minutes.

Techno just hums, that stupid little grunt that he does whenever he doesn't exactly want to spike conversation. Tommy half expects him to leave, but the man walks over, taking a seat carefully on the porch beside the boy, pressing his hands together in his lap.

Tommy's eyes narrow further.

If this is some sort of silent contest or whatever, he's probably gonna come out the loser. He always does with Techno; the fucker quite literally never speaks.

He turns his head, breathing coming out in a gust of warm air when he exhales, trying to distract himself.

"So, you gonna tell me why you were speakin' to a butterfly?" the man speaks up, and internally, Tommy's smug. He had won the 'no talking' contest, even if there wasn't one to begin with.

"I don't have to tell you shit," he says proudly, not even trying to hide the smirk crossing his face.

"Hmm."

Tommy rolls his eyes.

"'Hmm'- seriously, that's the first thing you're gonna say to me when you haven't seen me in a while? That dumb little grunt? You're so dumb, Techno," Tommy complains, turning away from the man and angrily putting his chin into his hands, eyebrows pulled into a frown.

Techno huffs, "Still ungrateful as ever, I see."

"Still the biggest bitch alive, I see," Tommy mocks, but he softens the second Techno runs a hand through his curls, leaning into it heavily. His eyes slip close, practically humming when

fingernails scratch ever so gently on his scalp.

Techno snorts, but it's chalked with amusement.

The hand pulls away after a few moments and Tommy forces down a whine, instead giving the man a look of pure betrayal. He earns a simple smirk in return and a gentle flick to the side of the head.

"Come on, gremlin," Techno says, standing and offering his hand, "Let's get you inside, alright? Phil wants to drive you to Eldritch Wings so you haven't got to walk."

Tommy scoffs, rolling his eyes, "Fucking old man. He acts as though I haven't walked through the snow and rain before to get to work."

Techno raises an eyebrow, looking minorly intrigued, and Tommy purses his lips.

"Whatever, just-- he's an asshole, and you are, too," the boy grumbles, taking Techno's scarred and calloused hand.

----

Wilbur leans against the doorway to the back patio, eyebrows furrowed.

Tommy's been quiet; a lot more than he usually is.

He doesn't blame him, though. Panic attacks take a lot out of someone. If there was anyone that understood that, it would be Wilbur. He used to have them constantly, practically every night, where he'd wake up and stumble over his feet in his rush to reach the bathroom in time.

There was a time where it was so bad that Phil had to speed him off to the nearest hospital, only to be told that there was "nothing wrong with him"-- that he simply had anxiety, even though Wilbur was certain that *anxiety* couldn't be the cause to feeling like you were on the verge of death.

The phrase "*Nothing's wrong with him*" quickly became a constant in Wilbur's life, just as the pain did. Every doctor that they visited when it got bad just gave Phil a look that stung with accusations. They would each say the same thing: "Take him home, let him get some rest, and he'll get over it eventually."

While they weren't wrong, they weren't exactly right, either. Wilbur did get used to it, but there are times when it'll come again— his heart rate will accelerate, the suspicion about being in harm or having a sort of disease would always arise, and he'd find himself sleeping in Techno or Phil's room again that night.

Out of all of his family members, though, his mother was always the best at helping with the panic attacks. She'd hold him close, wrap him up in one of the quilts she's knit and watch an animated movie with him, whether that be another Disney movie marathon or specifically the *Emperor's New Groove*.

He supposes that maybe he's gotten so good at taking care of others when it comes to these situations because of his own experience and knowing the way that his mother took care of *him*.

Tommy shouldn't be having these sorts of panic attacks at his age— the kind of ones that convulse your entire body, the ones where you're screaming because you can't feel your fingers, the kind where the entire world seems much too large for a child like him.

That's what he is, too— a child, a fifteen year old with the weight of so many responsibilities on his back that it's left a withdrawn and apathetic boy in its wake.

(One that is alone- so incredibly alone, and has been for a long time. How long, Wilbur isn't sure he wants to know).

"You alright, Wil?" Phil asks, gently pressing a hand against his forearm, eyebrows furrowing when he flinches a tad. His form sways, as though prepared to pull him to the sofa to watch something distracting at any moment—it's what they used to do when Wilbur's panicking got too bad, when he was pretty much incomprehensible.

Wilbur shakes his head, though. The crawling in his throat doesn't feel like the beginnings of anything too worrying. If anything, the anxiety is directed not towards himself, but towards the boy on the other side of the door. This is a rarity; normally, people are worried for *him*.

Normally, *Wilbur*'s the baby of the family, being the youngest (by only a few minutes), but he isn't anymore. He's glad of that he's not anymore—proud, if he were to be completely honest, even as something nervous continues to claw at his ribs.

"It's fine, just..." he coughs a little, glancing from Phil's worried expression to Tommy, who is curled up on the patio. The person that needs the most attention, for once, is not him. "*He* isn't okay, Phil."

Phil hums, pursing his lips and looking in the kid's direction as well. Tommy's back straightens a tad, as if he can feel them looking at him, so they turn away in unison.

"Techno's coming home pretty soon, says he's found something," Phil murmurs, picking his coffee mug up from the machine. He walks over to the fridge, pulling it open, mindful of the amounts of magnets and family photos plastered all over the front (they always seem to fall off occasionally).

Wilbur just hums, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He remembers getting the text as well; apparently there was some sort of 'glowing goop' back in the Banquet Hall. If there was one place he did not intend on ever returning to, that was it.

"You don't have to go, but I'm going to check it out after work," Phil continues, setting his mug on the countertop and unscrewing the lid on the milk. He raises an eyebrow at Wilbur, turning his head, "Before I do, I'm assuming you want to chat in the drawing room about Tommy?"

Wilbur hisses through his teeth a tad.

"It's not my business to say," Wilbur responds quietly, eyes narrowing. He fidgets then, uncomfortably from foot to foot, lips pursed. "I'll say this much, though— I wasn't wrong when I said that I thought he was alone at home."

Phil pauses from where he'd begun to pour the milk, hesitant before resuming. His movements are slow, though, and it's a minute before he turns, mug in hand, leaning against the countertop.

"He's home by himself?" He repeats, that look on his face that shows he's barely hiding his horror.

Wilbur nods solemnly, glancing over his shoulder once again.

Tommy's still sitting outside, completely oblivious to what's going on in the kitchen. For once, Wilbur's grateful for the soundproof glass.

"I can't say anything more, nor would I," Wilbur continues, giving Phil a look despite knowing that the man would never press beyond the kid's boundaries. "It's just- he's so *alone*, Phil, and you remember the... the first time we brought him over, how sick he was... that, as it seems, was not the worst of it."

Phil exhales, taking a swig of his coffee.

(If Tommy were in here, Wilbur supposes he'd laugh at how much of a 'dad' Phil looks like right now, but he's not- he's outside, and yet, it feels like he isn't even here at all).

"I suppose there's something we can do about that, then," Phil mumbles, flashing Wilbur a 'look,' and he smiles a little.



Wilbur is more than certain that 'something' includes contacting a lawyer.

Before Wilbur can reply, the tension is broken by the front door heaving open, bringing an exhausted looking Technoblade in its wake.

"Look who's home," Wilbur prods, giving his brother a small smile. Normally, he'd make fun of him more-- it's always funny when Techno goes on late night missions and has to end up staying with Squid overnight, who lives on the other side of Manberg. The guy always comes home exhausted, complaining that Squid is 'nocturnal' and shit.

Today, though, Techno's got his mouth pressed into a line, looking far more agitated than usual, so Wilbur leaves him be.

"Tommy's outside if you'd like to say hello," Phil announces, opening the fridge again so he can put the milk away and giving Techno a warm smile. Wilbur has always envied his father for being able to throw on this whole calm act despite everything going to absolute shit.

Techno huffs, holding up a beat-up luggage bag that Wilbur can only assume is his dirty clothes from his night out.

"Bring these upstairs for me, then?" He grumbles, setting them on the kitchen table.

Phil snorts, holding up the bag of clothes with his free hand, holding up a piece of the cloth between his fingers.

"Squid wouldn't wash them for you?"

Techno casts a glare at him, hand hovering over the back doorknob.

"Don't start, Phil."

----

Tommy taps his fingers against the front desk in boredom, a frown on his face. It had been an hour or so since Phil had driven him to the store, amidst a must too silent car ride.

There was clearly something that Phil wanted to ask him— something that resided within the tension that clung to the air in the man's car, but no matter how many times Tommy glanced over at him, he never looked back.

Oh, well. If it had been important, Tommy was certain he would've asked. Besides, there were more important things to worry about than Phil's internal old man drama.

For starters, Tommy's head has been cloudy all day-- he could tell that a migraine was forming pretty soon, but he couldn't figure out why.

Surely, something more had happened the night before. He can remember bits and pieces, from waking up in Wilbur's bedroom, the warm morning light against his back, to the pained look on the man's face all breakfast. Unfortunately, though, he couldn't remember what had happened.

From experience, Tommy supposes he'd had a panic attack. He'd had one before back when he was staying at Quackity's house, but couldn't remember what had happened- one second, his entire body was immovable, and the next he was waking up to Quackity's snoring on the floor beside him.

The guy had told him something about "blah blah panic attack, blah blah blah Dream," before he'd tuned out. He knew that he had panic attacks, he knew what they felt like, but he could never fully *remember* them, as if they were purposefully dragged out of his mind by some inner workings or mechanics. It made him feel dizzy; nauseated, even.

Still, he just about collapsed from embarrassment when he woke up to the sight of Wilbur sleeping beside him, his head on the man's chest, an arm wrapped around his back and his

own hand fisted in Wil's jumper.

The after effects ever since then have been pretty shitty- a mixture of motion sickness that made him feel woozy every time he stood up and an oncoming migraine- but it was nothing he hadn't dealt with before.

Either way, there was, potentially, someway he could deal with it.

Quackity and him had once watched a movie that declared "shopping was as good as therapy," so, despite hating therapy, Tommy has decided to possibly take that word as gospel and buy his friends Christmas presents.

He hates Christmas as much as the next guy-- fuck, he'd probably kill Phil if he was forced to put up those shitty lights in the store-- *however*, it was technically traditional to buy your friends (family, rather) presents. Or so he's heard.

Tommy's only bought (or, well, made) people gifts a couple of times, but only when he was really young. One Christmas, he'd given both Dream and George matching gloves he'd learned how to knit and Sapnap a jar of dirt, just to see the man splutter about how it "wasn't useful."

(It was always funny, even though Tommy couldn't help but feel warm every time he saw Sapnap's shelf holding the jars of dirt grow until it reached three. He hopes that the man never removed them, but he somehow knows that he has).

Christmas, as it is, fucking sucks- although, he figures it might not be a bad idea to get his friends something. Sure, he's broke, *sure*, he can hardly pay rent-- but-- it wouldn't hurt, right?

He narrows his eyes more, tapping his fingers more aggressively against the counter.

All that's left is to figure out how, exactly, he can get the money.

Tommy glances at his phone, then at the clock. He had exactly ten minutes left until his break between jobs, which gives him--

It clicks.

He grabs his phone, unlocking it and scrolling through his contacts. It takes him nearly forever to find the right one (he'd never saved the guy's contact out of pure hatred), and he presses the call button.

It rings a couple of times before a slightly irritated voice comes over the line.

"Hello? Who's this?"

Tommy grins widely.

"Hello, Jack Manifold," he says, spinning in his chair, "How would you like to go to the mall with me?"

"... How'd I like to *what?*"

----

Tommy grins widely, patting his hands on his knees, bopping his head back and forth to the radio.

In the driver's seat beside him, Jack looks ready to have a breakdown. Or, maybe, crash the car into a wall. Either one— both, most likely.

"I still can't tell if this is a prank or not," Jack grumbles for what has to be the sixth time that day, turning the car and pulling it into one of the empty spots in the car lot. There's really only one shopping center in all of Manberg and, luckily for Tommy, it's only a couple blocks away from Nook's, so it wasn't *that* difficult for Jack to pick him up and drive him there. Not at all.

"Nope, it's still not," Tommy says enthusiastically, unbuckling his seatbelt.

Jack turns the key in the ignition and exhales, dragging a hand down his face and rubbing a spot between his eyes.

"We've never hung out before," Jack states, turning to face Tommy almost accusingly, narrowing his eyes when the boy simply opens the car door.

"And?" Tommy says, slipping out the door. "Hurry up, bitch, or we'll miss it."

"We'll what? 'Miss it?' Miss what?" Jack whispers, his voice going all high-pitched the way it does when he's particularly bewildered by something Tommy does. He's certain that he's never heard Jack use that voice with anyone else. If it's an accomplishment or not, Tommy will take it in stride.

"The sale, obviously? Idiot," Tommy responds simply, slamming the car door shut and walking with long strides towards the center, Jack hot on his heels.

It's a cold day out, but at least the sun's not too covered by clouds.

Tommy hopes that it doesn't snow later, despite the weather app on his phone saying it will. Maybe it's just lying to him. Most weathermen do that.

----

Shopping after a mental breakdown is not, in fact, therapy.

It is *better* than therapy.

Everything smells of cinnamon and sugar (even though Tommy's certain that's just the multiple stands lined up in the plaza for Cinnabon) and nearly every store they're passing by has big signs saying 'Sale!' on the front.

This is probably heaven, probably hell- he doesn't know, and doesn't care to know.

Jack follows him through the mall in a haste, breathing heavily every time they stop for a couple of seconds, only to let out a loud groan when Tommy takes off running again.

"You've gotta... give me... a fucking *break*," Jack hisses out once they've stopped in front of a particular store that piques Tommy's interest. He's leaning all of his weight against the wall, looking close to crumbling. "We've been running around the fucking mall ever since we pulled up in the lot, man. Can you at least tell me what you're looking for here?"

"Stuff," Tommy supplies, and he doesn't even have to look over to know Jack's deadpanning him.

"Stuff," Jack repeats, standing up from where he'd slumped over and looking in at the store Tommy's so fascinated by. His nose wrinkles, taking in the numerous jewels and garnets sitting on display.

Tommy leans closer, excitedly pressing so close to the glass of the display window, hands making skid marks against the pane that Jack just knows they'll probably end up getting yelled at for.

"You're literally broke, Tommy, what the fuck are you doing?" Jack hisses, grimacing when Tommy presses his nose against the glass pane as well. "Eugh, man, that's literally disgusting, haven't you got any sort of decency?"

Tommy just hums, obviously not paying attention to him. He turns away from the store, walking with his chest puffed out, Jack following him with a confused look on his face.

“Tom,” he tries again, reaching out to grab for the boy’s sweater sleeve as things suddenly start to click in his head, “You— you can't be serious, you aren't, right? You realize you barely have any money, you tell me that all the time, so why the fuck are we at the shopping center? I probably should've asked you this shit *before* I drove all the way here, but I guess I was going through pure shock at the fact you'd asked *me* of all people to take you here in the first place.”

Tommy hums dismissively, not even meeting Jack’s eyes.

“It’s nearly Christmas,” Tommy aids super helpfully, pulling out of Jack’s grip and turning the corner, immediately gasping at another shop that looks interesting.

Jack’s nose wrinkles, his mouth opening and closing in pure bewilderment.

“Tommy— mate, you literally hate Christmas,” he says, blinking wildly as he follows Tommy, the kid positively buzzing in front of a warm looking bookstore. “You were just going off at Sam the other day for wanting to hang up decorations in the shop and now you’re- what, *Christmas shopping*?”

“Yes, I’m Christmas shopping,” Tommy says, still partially ignoring Jack (what else is new, really?) “You wouldn’t know what that’s like, though, because you’re friendless other than me.”

Jack deadpans him, feeling a wave of annoyance that is only available when he’s speaking with Tommy.

“You cannot be serious right now. You do realize I’ve got other friends, right? You’re the one who asked me to come with you in the first place, I canceled a trip to the park with Niki for

this—” Jack begins to rant, waving his hands about and tailing behind Tommy as the kid quickly walks into the bookstore they’d stopped in front of.

Tommy gasps suddenly, completely interrupting what Jack had been saying and taking off from his side, running further into the bookstore at a speed that leaves Jack standing (rather miserably, mind you) at the front entrance.

He exhales, dragging a hand down his face.

Really, he should’ve seen this coming.

He probably should’ve known better than to accept Tommy’s request to go to the fucking shopping centre.

The guy rarely spoke to him at Nook’s— sure, they were friends, but it was more like friends that picked on one another constantly than it was friends just in general.

They’ve never spoken out of the bakery besides that one time when Niki invited both of them to lunch with her downtown, but even then the bickering never stopped.

Still... Tommy was fascinating, in a both endearing and irritating way. There was a time when he thought that Sam was insane for hiring the kid; for multiple reasons, but the main one being that Tommy was just that.

A kid.

As much as Jack wanted to wring Tommy by the neck just to get him to shut up, he also wanted to pick his mind— to figure out the things that made him laugh (even though he already had a good idea of what that was, considering he chuckled everytime Sam told Jack off).



Most importantly, though, he wanted to know what Tommy *was*.

He was a teenager, that much was obvious, but how is it that a child of his stature— with bent shoulder blades and eyebags dark enough to make anyone worried— could maintain two part time jobs?

Jack couldn't do it.

Sure, he works at Nook's, but his *real* job is among the streets. The Hero Complex, despite their "disgust" towards illegal vigilantes, give a decent wage to anyone willing to do their dirty deeds as to not disrupt the image of their own clean-slated heroes.

Either way, Tommy was something of a closed book, so to speak.

An enigma wrapped up in a verbose, incredibly loud body of someone that reeked of *child soldier* and *crumbling teenager*.

Jack, like plenty others, wanted to figure him out.

Tommy comes rushing up to him suddenly, tugging on him by the arm, trying to steer him towards a particular part of the store. He exhales greatly but doesn't put up much of a fuss.

The kid looks happy— excited, really. He rarely looks this way unless one of the higher up heroes get their ass kicked on the television or if Sam brings Fran in for a day.

He can't help but feel a *tad* happy for him, despite the cloud of annoyance that had been growing the whole day.

"Jack, Jack, look at this!" Tommy's saying, stopping fully in front of a bookshelf stocked with little miniature figurines. Another thing about Tommy that Jack's noticed— he's

expressional, in a way that gives anyone an inside look at what he could be possibly feeling or thinking.

If his nose wrinkles, if his eyebrows pull together, he's either angry or confused or bothered — if his mouth downturns and he won't make eye contact, Jack always recognizes it as a time to not pick on him.

“What am I looking at, Tom?” he asks, gazing at the different figurines, eyes landing on the heroes that he recognizes from the Complex; Morpheus, of course, is the one that is most in stock, the one that probably every little kid has on their nightstand.

He resists the urge to make a face. Morpheus- what an egotistical psychopath. Or, at least, he seems that way. He is pretty popular, though, so at least that brings some sort of good revenue his way.

“Look at this shit,” Tommy motions with a hand wildly towards an empty portion of the book stand, jamming his finger at the name tag beneath it: Hypnos. “His fucking figurines are *always* sold out- it's so obnoxious.”

Jack grins, “What, are you a bit of a Hypnos fan then, Tom? Never pegged ya as a *Sleeper*.”

Tommy whirls on him so quickly that Jack fears that the kid may punch him (which he's done plenty of times before).

“I am not a fucking *Hypnos* fan, you freak,” Tommy seethes, smacking Jack in the chest, “It's just irritating, innit? His figurines are always sold out, and- the whole figurine business is such a cheap thing, don't you think? They're always selling the fucking *Deez Nuts* team but never the lower heroes. I don't see Captain up there, do you?”

Jack bursts into laughter, reaching his hand to grab onto a wall for support, shaking his head.

'Deez Nuts' team- how sad that *he* hadn't been the one to think of that to begin with.

Tommy Innit, an enigma; truly.

Hater of all heroes, but agitated by the smallest of things, like what type of figurines are sold.

(Then again, he wasn't entirely wrong. Jack had been raving about how he didn't get a figurine with Niki on multiple occasions, only to be shot down by "vigilantes don't get figurines either, so cut the shit.")

"I thought you hated heroes, Tom," Jack says once he's finished laughing, raising his eyebrows, a grin plastered on his face. "Sudden interest in them when you don't see your favourite hero on the shelf, I guess—"

"Fuck you, fuck you, I actually hope that you fall off a bridge and die, Jack Manifold," Tommy interrupts, slapping his hands over his cheeks, fingers plugging his ears.

Jack just snorts, rolling his eyes.

He skims over the shelves of figurines once more, looking at the one of Morpheus. It's weird how much it looks like him, but it doesn't at the same time. It's clearly the hero, but there's something not right about the way it's positioned. Carefree, high wound— a hero's stance.

Jack can't quite put his finger on it, though, so he assumes it's just his mind making shit up again or something.

Turning back to Tommy, who has calmed down by now and is staring at a figurine of Arsonist with a look that could represent mourning, Jack clears his throat.

"Why exactly did you bring me over here again?" he asks, a shred of apprehension in his tone.

“Oh, right,” Tommy says, not even glancing his way before picking up a figurine that Jack doesn’t recognize— a girl with bright pink hair, possibly from an anime, but certainly not one of the heroes. “I need you to pay for this.”

Jack blinks rapidly, shooting Tommy a look of bewilderment, “You what?”

----

Tommy's smiling the second he walks into Nook's, a giant grin on his face as though he's accomplished something-- always a bad sign.

Sam blinks, watching the way the kid bounces into the back room to change, slightly confused.

Did he find a cat on the side of the road or something?

He gets his answer the second Jack walks through the front door, carrying three different bags and looking utterly pissed. His back is hunched over-- Sam has to resist a snort at how much like Tommy he looks at the moment-- and his whole face seems to be pulled downwards into a glare.

"What's all that you got there?" Sam asks, barely concealing the amusement in his tone as he watches Jack stumble through the door, practically throwing the bags onto the ground beside the front door, expression still twisted into a frown. He probably shouldn't have asked-- he was rubbing salt into an open wound, really-- but it was pretty funny to watch Jack's head swivel in his direction, a threat practically peeling from off of his skin.

"Tommy Innit," Jack spits out, walking with full strides towards the back room, "Is a fucking *menace*."

Sam snorts, “I’m assuming the bonding session went well?”

“It didn’t. It did not go fucking well, and now, because of him, I’m- I’m in my Joker arc, Sam,” Jack seethes, practically slamming the back room door shut when he walks out.

Sam turns to Tommy expectantly, eyebrows raised, and the kid just plasters an innocent grin on his face.

“He’d make an excellent Joker, I reckon,” Tommy comments cheerily, putting an apron over his neck.

Jack definitely won’t be working at the register tonight.

----

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" Phil murmurs, worriedly running his hands up and down Wilbur's arms.

He's all dressed up in his villain outfit- the green and black suit, the plague doctor mask tucked underneath one arm, his hybrid suppressor tucked away in one of the pockets. His wings, recently preened by Techno, are tucked behind his back, but flinch when Wilbur scoffs.

"I'll be fine, Phil," he insists, patting the man's arm gently, "No need to get all bird brain on me, old man. I've been feeling a lot better, alright? All that rest has helped quite a bit."

Phil purses his lips, still looking conflicted.

"You're sure?"

"Very sure," Wilbur says, giving the man a vague smile. "I'm feeling pretty great today, actually, despite the fuck all that's going on about Tommy."

"We'll figure it out, I promise," his father supports, and Wilbur just exhales.

"I know, I-" he pauses, gnawing on his cheek. He really didn't want to get involved in Tommy's business or break the kid's boundaries- he really did care for him. He wanted him to be happy just as much as he wanted him to be safe, and Manberg was far from the safest of places. Living in that little apartment all by himself for however long he has with nobody to talk with except the empty, picture-less walls, has got to have driven him mad. Not to mention, the kid has had a debt with Techno before, which says something about his self preservation tactics. A debt with a supervillain, with *The Blade*, of all of them-- it was unheard of, in most cases.

Wilbur grimaces a tad, silently waving away the sudden reminder that he now owed a debt to fucking *Morpheus* of all people. That, too, was pretty unheard of- he figures that, if the others in the supervillain underground knew of it, they'd laugh their asses off. The Syndicate, owing something towards Manberg's number one superhero.

It was a load of bullshit, but he knew that Techno, if anyone, would repay his debts.

Shaking the thoughts from his head, Wilbur clears his throat, "I might actually patrol later tonight, if that's alright. Nothing crazy, just make sure that everything's in line, stretch my legs a tad. If you're searching the Banquet, I'll take your and Tech's patrol jobs tonight, see if any heroes are sniffing around our territory."

"I think that you should just rest some more," Phil responds, brushing a curl out of his son's face.

"I will, I will- I didn't mean now, just... maybe sometime tonight, if you're still checking out the glowing goop Techno's all freaked about. I'd really like to get out of the house, breathe in the fresh air again. Staying inside- cooped up in here- it's, uh, not the best," Wilbur murmurs, tilting his head into his father's hand a tad. He always liked it when Phil brushed his hair out of his face- he always has.

Phil hums, on the border between amusement and fondness.

"I understand, kiddo. Just promise me you'll be careful then, alright?"

Wilbur smiles a bit.

"Only if you will, too." he jokes, letting out a sudden cough when Phil pulls him into a tight hug, wings wrapping around his form. "For fuck's sake, Phil, are you trying to strangle me or something?"

"Be careful," Phil repeats, completely dodging his last question. Wilbur buries the urge to roll his eyes- the old man was always so worried when he didn't have his hybrid suppressor on.

"I will, *Dad*. Jeez. I promised you that I would."

Phil remains there for a moment, only pulling away when the sound of Techno's footsteps creak down the stairs, the clinking of gold jewelry pressing together.

"We'll be home later tonight," Phil says for the thousandth time that afternoon, giving Wilbur another careful smile, eyes swirling with vague concern. "Alright?"

"Yes, yes, okay," Wilbur backs up, waving his hands as if to shoo him away, "Go check out the- the glow in the dark slime or something."

"Not slime," Techno pipes up from the other room, leaning his head around the corner as he ties his boots.

Wilbur waves his hand dismissively, slumping down on the sofa, "Whatever the fuck it's called."

Techno just huffs, standing to full height. He, too, has put his hybrid suppressor away, his ears ending in points, eyes a startling red even from this distance.

"Don't do anything reckless while we're gone, Wil," he grumbles, shifting the weight of his sword on his back.

Wilbur just gives him a strained smile.

"Don't patronize me, Technoblade."

Techno's face drops.

"You need to stop going around Tommy for, like, a month."

----

The second Tommy walks out the front entrance of Nook's, he feels a chill go down his spine.

His breath comes out in a gust and he rubs his hands together, wishing that he had a pair of gloves or something to keep his hands at least a little warm.

He winces— something had pricked him, right in the palm of his hand. He holds it up to his face, squinting in the light illuminating from inside Nook's, and finds a flower.

It's a bud of a flower, only slightly grown, right in the center of his palm. There are no petals, just the stem.



Blinking, Tommy pulls the flower from his hand, and winces immediately— it makes a *pluck* sound, the same sound he remembers flowers making when he'd pick them in the Hero Complex's rooftop gardens. The most bewildering thing, though, was that it had *hurt*.

Weird, but not abnormal. This had happened to him before. Quackity used to tell him that it was his karma for digging around in the dirt all day; he'd gotten a "flower infection," whatever the hell that meant. As far as Tommy was concerned, flowers were poggers- if he got infected with them, it would be a nice disease, for once.

Flicking the stamen to the side, barely even watching it dissolve into the piles of snow pushed against the corner of Nook's, Tommy rubs his hands together again. It's growing far colder as it pushes near Christmastime.

He breathes warmth onto his hands and slings the gift bags further up his arms. When he exhales, it comes out in a burst of fog.

Tommy takes another look back at Nook's, at Jack and Sam talking with one another inside, at the Christmas lights flickering between green and red over the windows. A part of him, strangely, wants to go back inside— to forget that he has to go home, that he has to feed Oswald and head to bed, and just *stay*.

Maybe thank Jack Manifold again for helping him buy gifts— he'd probably rather be shot than do that though, if he was being honest— or get another hair ruffle from Sam, a quiet little "*I'm proud of you, kiddo*" pressed into his hands. (Sam's hands were always warm, as though he was the oven itself, a personal heater).

It's a tempting thing, putting the warmth of Nook's Bakery in competition with the cold alleyways that Tommy would have to take back home.

While Nook's is a place of colour and a warm, fuzzy thing in Tommy's chest, Manberg is a place of grays and dullness.

Putting more warmth into his hands, Tommy shakes the thoughts from his head. He glances back and forth down the road, checking for any oncoming traffic, before beginning his trek

towards his apartment.

It's cold tonight, but at least the snow's stopped. It was pretty bad earlier that afternoon after he and Jack had left the shopping center, but it's calmed, leaving a simple blanket atop the rooftops of apartment buildings and the windowsill of Nook's.

Tommy puts his hood up, hoping that it provides at least a tad of warmth against the cool breeze brushing against the nape of his neck and ears. It isn't much, but he doesn't exactly have a beanie or anything, either (he could just imagine the annoying shit that Wilbur would say if Tommy walked in wearing a fucking beanie if all things).

The way home is always a long one, but he finds comfort in the sky these nights, picking out random stars to come up with fantastical stories about. He always diverges to the star that blinks the faintest, the one that nobody else seems to look at.

Tonight, that's the one farthest from the moon.

It's always that one, always the one that seems to fade every time he looks up again, but it's still there, like a heart still beating (albeit faintly).

Hoisting the gift bags up his arms a little more and pulling them towards his chest, he tilts his head, examining the star. Tommy doesn't really need to pay attention to his surroundings, or where he's walking; he's made this walk home enough times to skirt around the telephone poles in his way, or duck underneath low hanging branches from trees planted beside buildings.

Tonight, as Tommy walks, he decides to make the star a painter.

Their name, he'll never know, but he knows that they've filled far too many canvases to count. Tommy figures that their hands, if they have any, are constantly an arrangement of greens and blues and golds. He imagines that the feeling of the polished handle of a paintbrush is not at all foreign to them, nor is it the bruised and aching knuckles that come with sitting at an easel for far too long.

Tommy was never a painter himself, but George was-- on days they had off, he'd always be sat in front of the easel for hours, dressed in a pair of dingy overalls that made Tommy snort. Dream always told Tommy to not bother him while he's in his 'thought process,' but Tommy couldn't help it-- once, George had accidentally drank his paint water instead of the coffee Sappap sat out for him and Tommy had nearly burst a lung from laughter.

It was a few out of a handful of good times that he'd had back in the Complex. There weren't many left to count, if any at all.

The star, Tommy decides, will have drank paint water, too. Maybe their friends switched out their cups, or they simply aren't looking and grab the wrong one as George had that day.

Maybe the star's an upcoming artist, one who can't quite figure out how to show their art to the world but overworks themselves on each one until they're on the verge of collapse, waking up the day after with their cheek pressed against their own canvas. Tommy imagines that they spend every moment they can on their art, creating things that leave them hollowed out from the inside, plastering every thought and emotion onto the canvas with colours.

Tommy envies them- a star, a made up person in his mind- but he knows that he'll never be them.

Art wasn't his thing.

He looks away from the sky, shaking his head to rid the thoughts from it. Stars and fictional characters- he figures that maybe he's been around Karl a bit too often lately.

Tommy stops, suddenly, every thought seeping out of him and replaced with a prick of fear.

In the midst of everything, there will always come his instincts.

Something's wrong— he can feel it, crawling up his arms, peeling into his shoulder blades.

Tommy blinks a couple times, glancing at his whereabouts.

He's standing just at the entrance of a dark alleyway, one that he tends to walk past every time he's on his way back to his apartment. It just so happens, funnily enough, to be the very same alleyway that he'd walked by with Wilbur all that time ago, the night that Wilbur had received an 'urgent family call.'

The hairs on Tommy's neck stand up. He can't see through the darkness, but he can feel it.

There's a person, standing just on the other side of the alleyway, facing him. Even in the pitch black dark, with only the moonlight giving some sort of knowledge towards how the figure looks, Tommy can tell that they're fucking tall, and--

Tommy... he knows that figure, doesn't he?

Their stature, their height, the way they carry themselves... it's so familiar, and yet so distant.

And then they laugh, something short and ruined, and Tommy's gut twists.

He knows *exactly* who that is.

There's not a second that goes by before Tommy's turning on his heel, taking off through the alleyways, his heart racing. Somehow, he hasn't dropped the Christmas gifts onto the floor, hoisting them up to his chest and pressing them close.

Something burns in his eyes-- desperation, or maybe fear-- and he rounds another corner.

He just about slips on a piece of ice as he's running, only barely catching himself on a wall; he doesn't take a second to rest, continuing to run. He can hear the Bard hot on his heels, the sneering laughter echoing against the alleyways, and for the second time in his life, Tommy wishes that he hadn't walked home alone.

Tommy was stupid, careless-- he hadn't thought twice about calling Techno or even asking *Jack* of all people to walk him home. He'd gotten so used to that false sense of security after so long of not seeing the Bard around- from hardly even hearing from the fucker except for the Banquet.

All it takes now is one slip up and he's dead.

He's realizing it, for the second time, and the feeling nearly makes him trip over his own feet and collapse onto the wet pavement.

"You're growing tired," The Bard's voice echoes through the alleyways, but Tommy ignores it, letting out a choked sob that is lost to the howling wind rushing past his ears. The bitter cold digs like knives into his lungs, into his skin, into his eyes-- he's been through this before, in much different (yet similar) circumstances, but he can't give up. Not yet.

Tommy decides not to grace the Bard with an answer- any word he says could be used against him. If he makes it out of this chase alive, the Bard won't know his voice, won't know his face (unless he does already, which in that case, any hope of living would be futile).

He rounds a corner, his head spinning.

Motion sickness- a true curse, the aftermaths of a panic attack that still hadn't dissolved from his body.

(Tommy's certain that if he does, somehow, get out of this situation alive, that he will most definitely have another one. At least one upside of dying at the hands of the fucking *Bard* is evading a potential panic attack again).

Grabbing onto the wall, Tommy breathes heavily, each inhale feeling as though daggers are digging into his esophagus and spreading through his lungs like wildfire (how funny it is, for the cold chill to feel so incredibly opposite). It's only a millisecond before he's running again, dragging himself along, suddenly all too ungrateful that he'd used up all of his energy earlier that day running around a mall.

Unfortunately, though, all it takes is a quick glance in the wrong direction-- a miscalculation from his head spinning, from the memories crawling up his skin with the snow that clings to his back and his spine-- and then the Bard's on him.

A shadow towers over him, against the moonlight, and he's met with a dead end, an inevitable death sentence.

"Gotcha," the villain rumbles darkly before there's a gun pressing against the back of his skull.

-----

Wilbur's closing in on him; he can feel it, adrenaline coursing through his arms and his bones, something that he'd long missed.

He had been bedridden for days on end, unable to do much but help decorate the Christmas tree and mosey around, but now he was given the perfect reward in the shape of a person wearing an all too familiar red and white hoodie.

The witness was fast, though, just as Wilbur could remember from the last time they'd played cat and mouse.

It was unfortunate that they took the wrong turn at the wrong time; maybe they didn't know Manberg's layout as well as they'd seemed to last time he'd chased them.

A sickening grin curls across Wilbur's lips, his heels echoing against the alleyway's walls as he approaches the person, whose back remains to him.

"Gotcha," Wilbur rumbles, his smile a wicked thing as he reaches into his holster, grabbing his gun. He closes in on his prey, on the witness-- on who he's certain had to have been there, at the Banquet that night, after the times he's had to think about it. Gently, but with a sudden burst of something fierce in his chest, Wilbur presses the barrel of his gun against the back of the person's head. "You may be quite a quick one, but I am quicker."

The person in front of him's shoulders tense, and he can hear their shallow breathing.

Fear; undoubtedly.

He's glad.

He hopes that they're afraid.

If they're who he thinks they are, they were good as dead-- and Gods, who is he to care about the witness scenario anymore, when there was the *Banquet* to account for?

He nearly died.

His *family* nearly died.

A flicker of anger curls through him, ripping like claws and digging on his insides, a sudden burst of recklessness. It was his downfall, his pride; but he doesn't care. Not now.

"Turn around," Wilbur hisses, gripping the gun tighter. He never really cared about seeing his witness' faces when he killed them-- Techno was the sick one of the family-- but this one... he was curious. If they were some sort of vigilante, he'd like to know. He knew most vigilantes;

maybe he could put name to face, or at the very least, ask Niki or another vigilante friend about them.

Instead of complying, the person's head hangs low, hood falling over their face more than before (it's only now that Wilbur realizes how big this jacket is on them-- the flecks of gold that reflect symbols on the back are the same that he'd seen from before, but it makes him a tad apprehensive to think this could be someone else entirely).

Pushing past the growing suspicion in his throat, Wilbur digs the barrel deeper into the person's neck.

"Turn around," Wilbur repeats through his teeth, and the person exhales something shaky.

There's a pause, and then they begin to turn.

It's a flash of gold curls, of defiant but tear-welled blue eyes, and freckles across a much too young face, and Wilbur's whole world falls apart.

He almost says it-- the boy's name, the one that has never once been foreign to his tongue, or to his mind-- but it doesn't come out of his mouth.

The great Bard, the silver tongued villain-- is speechless.

Maybe it's true, that pride really is his downfall, because he's beginning to feel it again. The aftermath of what happens when he's learned something he wished he never did.

The anxiety that comes with a hunt gone wrong, the knowledge that he shouldn't know, that he should never know.

Ignorance is bliss, and he's beginning to feel its detriment.



"Do it," Tommy whispers, breaking through his thoughts, and he presses his forehead against the barrel, tone both venomous and broken in a way Wilbur wishes to never hear again. There's something prickling in the back of Wilbur's head-- hope, perhaps-- that this is just some misunderstanding.

That he can back away now, apologize, and explain that he's made a mistake- that he was searching for someone that wronged him. That his witness isn't, and never was, Tommy.

But the words won't leave his mouth.

Tommy lets out a choked noise, eyes searching every inch of Wilbur's masked face, and his tone sounds all too broken as he whispers, "Do it. I'm a witness, Bard. *Do it.*"

Wilbur blinks, slowly, feeling as though time's slowed down.

So, it's true, and every trace of hope evaporates from his core in an instant.

The effects, the horrible carnage of being a villain-- it's here, he believes, in the form of his shaking little brother, who looks so incredibly ready to die by his hands.

Then there are tears that overflow in the boy's eyes, an indentation forming against the skin of his forehead where the front of his gun-- Wilbur's gun, his favourite one-- rests.

Wilbur feels as though he's going to be sick.

It's almost like he's on autopilot when he drops the gun to the ground with a clatter, backing away quickly as though he'd been singed, back hitting against the alleyway wall. There's the feeling of pain scorching through his shoulder blades at the walls- misshapen, horribly built- piercing against skin through his costume, but he ignores it.

The boy-- stars, *his brother*-- stares at him, face painted in confusion and defiance, tears trekking down his cheeks. He hasn't made one move to run, to fight back-- *nothing*. He's just standing there, his shoulders weighing down, hair matted against his forehead with sweat, waiting for whatever comes next. In the very, very cloaked light of the moon, Wilbur can see the glinting of the emerald necklace around his neck, the very one that matches the one Wilbur left at home.

(There's fear, so much despair and loathing in his eyes, something that Wilbur wishes he never has to see again. The very thought of that being directed at him, *towards* him... it's a fate that he can't possibly bear).

For a few heavy moments, neither of them say a word.

The only thing Wilbur hears is the ringing in his ears, his own heavy breathing, and the somehow loud sound of Tommy's teardrops hitting the asphalt.

For once, everything is quiet- the city is dead to the world around it, and there are no sounds of sirens, of people shouting, of music. There's just the two of them, standing in an alleyway, a valley of their sins displayed before them, and neither one of them seems envious of taking the first step in.

Wilbur can feel the shift in the air as soon as it happens.

Tommy's eyebrow twitches, his hands-- a palm dusted with blood and sweat, the other clean-- coming up to clutch at his own throat, as though he can't breathe. Wilbur has to do everything in his power not to let out a gut wrenching sob- this is what it must feel like to watch everything crumble right in front of you.

Then, Tommy takes one step towards him, hunched in on himself, when things escalate.

It's the look of the boy's face in the moonlight, of his freckles illuminated and hair like gold, of the blood dripping from a place on his forehead that he'd apparently hit against something in his attempts to escape Wilbur-- fuck, to *escape* him-- it's a mixture of it all.

Something clicks in his head, and as soon as it occurs, as soon as Wilbur can feel his fingertips again, he turns and runs down the alleyway, not daring to look back.

----

Tommy has given up.

Or, at least, he had— in the alleyway, he had decided to give in just for once.

Allowed his boundaries to crumble to the floor, just as they had for the first time in months in the bathroom at the Banquet, and decided; it was okay. He was going to let himself finally be free- to let the Bard, who was holding a gun to his head-- not a first, but certainly the last-- to be the one who takes everything from his grasp.

He never did know what it was like to live-- he knew what it meant to be alive, to feel things any normal person felt, to know what it meant to cough up blood and to carry around a weight on his shoulders everywhere he went, but he never did learn what it meant to truly *live*.

It's there, in the alleyway, that Tommy realizes his death won't be pretty.

It won't be something out of a fairytale that makes the readers grasp at their chest, tears welling up in their eyes, or something that an artist (as the star) could paint on a canvas to depict the beauty in a person's final breaths.

His death will be empty- the final intake of a breath, the sound of a gunshot echoing against the walls of an alley, and then it'll be gone. Every single thing he stood for, all the words he'd said (and hasn't said yet) will be singed from his tongue and he'll be gone.

There won't be a funeral for Tommy, not like there was for Theseus.

He figures this time, though, he won't let his last dying breath be taken for granted- he won't let his murderer stare him in the eyes as he dies, and he certainly won't let himself die with their face forever engraved in the iris of his eyes.

So, there's an intake of breath, and then he's closing his eyes--

And then there's the clamoring of feet, of heels against pavement, but they're fading from his earshot. He opens his eyes immediately, head swiveling in the direction that the footsteps are heading in, watching the coattail of the Bard disappear around the corner of a building.

He pauses, waits, and then collapses onto his knees, letting out something between a shriek and a sob.

Somehow, he was granted mercy.

Tommy- granted mercy from one of the Syndicate members, the Bard nonetheless- despite being a witness.

Is this what it means to live?

No, he thinks, no. It's destiny making fun of him again- pulling at him, taunting him.

This is just another way to tell him that it's not over for him yet.

The universe likes to keep him around for its own entertainment.

At least he's still granted the opportunity to give his friends their Christmas presents, even if the bags they were in are sodden from the afternoon snowfall.

It sinks into his boots, which have gotten wet from the scuffle, and a shiver runs down his back. His face feels like it's frozen, his hair is sticky with sweat-- or blood, he can't quite figure it out yet-- and his clothes feel as though they're glued to him.

Tommy isn't certain how long he's stood in the alleyway until his phone chimes; his normal reminder at one in the morning to feed his fish, typically the time he'd arrive home from work, had he actually gotten home on time.

He takes a shaky breath of air, feeling daggers down his throat at the chill-- the breath he lets out is a burst of warm air, and he tries stepping forward again.

Somehow, he's still standing.

It's a miracle, he supposes.

Bending down carefully, ears ringing and eyes constantly darting around the alleyway, as though expecting the Bard to return with the other members of the Syndicate in hand, Tommy picks up the dropped bags of Christmas gifts.

Hoping, distantly, that they aren't ruined (and that he may make it home alive), Tommy begins his trek home, legs feeling as though they're made of lead.

(The distant consideration that he may not be real makes its reappearance, and he allows himself to drift).

----

When Wilbur re enters his house, he does so without hardly realizing it.

He puts his mask, his beanie, and his coat away, moving without blinking. His movements are robotic, no longer the fluidity of someone that's just come back from a successful hunt, but rather that of a person in mourning.

Why is he mourning?

He hasn't lost anyone, technically.

(And yet, he still feels as though he has, something hollow carving itself into his chest).

If Techno and Phil were here, he's certain that they'd be stopping him as he walks through the house, hands reaching out to grab him by the arms, to try and calm him down, but there would be no reaching him.

Currently, he's elsewhere; anywhere but here.

Every step towards his bedroom feels like a century, with his breathing shorting, tongue dry.

Not a single coherent thought forms in his head- it remains completely and entirely blank, overcrowded with a new feeling of pure and total dread.

His hands shake, much like Tommy's had the night before (and his gut twists at the very thought of the boy's name). It takes a few tries for Wilbur to properly open the door to his bedroom, waiting for the click before he enters.

It's the same way as he'd left it that morning.

The covers are in a disarray, pulled back, and his guitar has been moved beside his bed from when he'd sung to Tommy the night before. (He isn't sure if the kid even remembers it, but he hopes, somewhere, that he does. That at least he left some sort of good impression, that the last thing the kid saw of him wasn't him pointing a gun to his head).

His stomach drops at the memory and he curls in on himself, a hand moving up to anxiously paw at the chain hanging beneath his shirt. Wilbur pulls it out, running a thumb over the emerald, and any ability to breathe clogs in his throat.

It's here, in the sanctuary of the pristine white walls and a mirror that's been smashed on too many occasions, that Wilbur lets himself fully break down.

----

The terror of walking into an empty flat, one that smells of rotting snow and something dull (if emptiness had a stench, Tommy believes it would be him)-- it's nearly overwhelming, but relieving, all in the same breath.

His movements are slow, paced, limbs feeling heavier than they ever had when he sets the Christmas presents onto the kitchen counter. He makes sure that the front door is locked three times- twisting the lock twice, taking a few steps back, only to make sure it is a third time due to the racing of his heart.

Tommy's hands, his face, his legs, his toes, his eyes-- everything about him, not just physically, feels numb on an entirely different level. It's as though he's reliving two days simultaneously over again- as though he's being held by the front of his shirt atop that tower, as though he's being led through the bursting flames of the fucking Banquet, watching everything fall apart before his eyes.

Hands reach up to his throat, clawing at any breath to come out, for any words to come out, but none do.

He's moving on autopilot when he walks through his apartment, not turning a single light on, relishing the safety that the dark brings him-- it's not alerting, and it will make it look as though nobody's home if the Syndicate were to come knocking.

(The Blade did happen to know where he lived, after all, and he kicks himself mentally for ever helping the fucker).

Tommy goes from the kitchen to the sofa in a blink, peeling off the wet and bloodied hoodie from over his head, tossing it to the side. He should've burned it when he had the chance, really; maybe if he had, he wouldn't be in this situation.

There's a few moments that he has in silence, where the swarm of thoughts that dare to slaughter every portion of his being calm, and then his phone pings.

His stomach fills with dread- distantly he feels as though he shouldn't check it.

A constant fear of his was Quackity reaching out to him, or someone else figuring out that he had been one of the people who'd planned to watch the Banquet burn to the ground, taking the hierarchy with it.

Anxiety, however, the feeling of missing something important or someone important, gets the better of him, and he pulls his phone from his trousers pocket. The screen has another crack in it from his scuffle; brilliant.

Blinking past the pain in his eyes, the stinging that's become present, he holds the device closer to his eyes.

A message from Quackity, and his stomach drops.

**Quackity:** happy birthday, tommy.

*Oh*, he thinks, blinking rapidly at the simple text message.

He pulls the top of the screen down, staring at the 1:34 am, December 14th staring right back at him.



His throat clears, eyes stinging far worse than they had before, and he clicks his phone off to glance around his dark, far too empty apartment.

"Happy birthday, Tommy," he says aloud, to nobody in particular, voice hoarse.

Tommy waits for a couple of moments, as if expecting a reply.

Nothing comes.

## Chapter End Notes

\*backing up slowly\* now fellas...

i swear it's fine. it's all good haha. just plot n shit u know how it be. this was written directly after last chapter in like. one sitting or so. i'm exhausted. many apologies if i disappear again<333

so on another note whatd u guys think of that haha.. that lore.. and the crimeboys irl stream.. haha..... (collapses for another month/srs)

<333 very big thank u to foxie my beta for this chap hehe<333 this chapter is dedicated to foxie, peachy, & cinder my beloveds<33 (/p)

i'm so tired

# become the warm jets

## Chapter Summary

"It was Tommy," Wilbur whispers. It's so quiet, so incredibly broken that the words Phil wants to speak disintegrate on his tongue.

Tommy.

What was Tommy?

He can't remember anything that could subject 'Tommy' as something, other than the worst.

"What do you mean?"

A pause, and then the man's talking again. It all comes out in a burst, with heaves in between words, but it isn't as shaky as it was before.

"The witness, Phil. I— I saw him, I chased him, I... I nearly killed him. He was the witness, the one I kept telling you about? It was him. It was *Tommy*."

or, uh oh, electric boogalooo 2. it's party time

## Chapter Notes

**TWS:** implied/referenced past child abuse, mild violence, references to attempted character death, thoughts of self-hatred, physical pain as a result of hybrid suppressors, very very mild emetophobia warning, and very severe panic attacks displayed in detail. LORD. this one is a doozy, *please* be careful<3

twos are heavy for this chapter— please stay safe & let me know if i've forgotten anything! (pspsps the end notes r important as well! pls read them if u can<3 /nf)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"You knock first."

"No, *you* knock first."

Ranboo exhales loudly, giving his friend a look of anguish. His arms are filled with boxes—two are wrapped in birthday paper and the top is a plain white box. Wrapped around their arm, tied down and pressing against the overhang between each apartment, are three balloons.

"Tubbo," Ranboo begins, "My hands are literally full. *Yours* aren't. Knock."

Tubbo doesn't even glance up at him from where he's got his phone out, tilting it to the left and right. It was recent that he'd gotten into the mobile game Temple Run. He really needed to stop.

"Tubbo," Ranboo says again, reaching their foot out to kick the back of Tubbo's leg, finally alerting his attention a tad. "I can't knock on the door. I have no hands to knock with. Stop getting chased by a gigantic skull-faced monkey for one minute and knock, please."

Tubbo glares at him, but finally subdues, shutting his phone off and knocking on the door with a closed fist. Impatient, much.

"Tommy," Tubbo calls after a slight pause. He knocks again. "Open the door, Tommy, we know you're in there."

Silence.

"*Tommyyyy*," Tubbo drawls impatiently, leaning all of his weight onto the door and standing on his tiptoes to try and look through the peephole, "Open the door up, idiot, we've got some shit for you!"

More silence.

Tubbo sighs and turns his head, shrugging.

"We might have to try force," he suggests, and Ranboo narrows their eyes.

"We are not breaking Tommy's door down again."

Tubbo groans, tossing his head back in anguish.

"Why *not*? It's so much easier and it'll be like— we can pretend we rehearsed it or something, y'know, like a surprise birthday party—"

"We are not breaking Tommy's door down again," Ranboo repeats, tone deadpan.

Tubbo rolls his eyes, crossing his arms.

"You're no fun," he grumbles, leaning his head back against the front door.

A pause.

"How's this, then," Tubbo holds a finger up to emphasize his point, "If he doesn't open that door when I ram my entire body weight into it, *then* we break it down."

Ranboo opens his mouth to disagree but Tubbo interrupts.

"It's either that or we try crawling in using the fire escape and breaking his expensive window," Tubbo says, and Ranboo's nose wrinkles. They continue, a slight smirk playing on their face, "Or, of course, you could just teleport inside like a good friend."

Ranboo considers this a moment, then sighs, shoulders drooping.

Hopefully Tommy won't be too pissed. He understood how Ranboo felt about taking his hybrid suppressor off in public.

"Just... try not to break it too badly, okay?"

Tubbo hums absentmindedly, slipping off the golden ring around his finger. In an instant, their goat ears appear and their horns grow out. It's always weird to see someone remove their hybrid suppressor— as though you're watching them grow their hybrid features in real time.

Once, Ranboo wanted to see what it looked like on themselves and took off their own suppressor in the mirror. It's now one of the many topics they speak about with their therapist on Sundays.

---

Of course, Tommy's front door ends up splintered.

Ranboo grimaces, stepping over what remains of it, little pieces of wood scattered across the front entryway.

At least it wasn't *too* bad.

Sure, it was *splintered*, but it wasn't like the other time when Tubbo had full on taken the door off of the hinges and slammed it into this old television Tommy found off the side of the road. The two of them didn't speak for like, a week after that. (It could've been more, but the two hated being apart from each other. Best friends stick together and whatnot, even if

Tommy played it off as just wanting to use Tubbo and Ranboo's television now that his was six feet under).

If anything, though, they could just say that Tubbo had just put a minor crack in it and then potentially play off the whole splintered thing as someone else trying to break the door down or something. Ranboo was slowly getting better at the art of gaslighting, even though it wasn't like Tommy had much to steal other than Oswald and that pile of dirty clothes that smelled like a boy's locker room.

Okay... it didn't sound like the greatest of stories. Distantly, Ranboo begins to worry for their kneecaps. Tommy will probably take a baseball bat to them like he did the last time they knocked the door down.

Hopefully he won't end up taking the *full* blame. Maybe he could lie and say that he *did* teleport and that Tubbo was just being aggressive. Sure, it might end with him losing a roommate, but it was fine. He'd totally win full custody over Michael in a courtship.

Tubbo, as though he can hear Ranboo's thoughts, shoots them a sharp glare before steeping further into the apartment.

He pauses for just a moment, his ears perking up and head turning as he glances around in confusion.

The apartment's empty, but it's always empty. Tommy had literally no furniture other than the stuff given with the flat itself and that beat up sofa pressed up against the living room corner.

There was also Oswald's tank and Oswald himself, who was eagerly swimming around and tapping against the glass in excitement.

"Something feels off," Tubbo murmurs, standing in the center of the living room, directly in the spot where Ranboo usually redyes Tommy's hair for him. The boy spins around a bit, tapping his forefinger and thumb together the way he does when he's nervous or thinking.

Ranboo stands beside him, frowning a little.

They feel it, too. There's an emptiness to the air, far more than there usually is.

Whenever Tommy's here, he always makes the flat seem more vibrant than it is. Truthfully, even if Tommy was placed into a completely furniture-less house with plain white walls, he'd still somehow make it a home.

Tommy had far more friends than he probably realized, people that cared for him, that would do *anything* for him. The kid was smart, but social skills had never been his forte. He knew a person's emotions well, could be instinctual when it came to knowing someone's thoughts, but when it came to personal friendships or the open arms of a family, Tommy was pretty much clueless.

Clearing his throat, Ranboo turns away from where he'd been gazing at Oswald to look at Tubbo again. There's a concentrated expression on his friend's face, a morph of confusion and etched concern.

"Maybe he's at work?" Ranboo suggests, hating the way his voice wavers a tad. Certainly that was it, right? Tommy worked often with strangely sporadic shifts. He probably just had a shift today they hadn't known about.

Tubbo makes a strange noise, clicking his nails together.

"Something isn't right," he repeats, turning in another circle. "Everything just feels so... strange without him here."

"Let's check his workplaces?" Ranboo says once more, stepping over and putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. He has to jostle the presents in his arms in order to do so, but he manages. "I'm sure he's there, if anything."

Tubbo thinks for another moment, then nods.

"Yeah," he murmurs, wrapping his arms around his own torso. He walks past Ranboo towards the splintered door, motioning towards the kitchen counter as he passes it. "Yeah. Uh... leave the balloons and shit here so that we don't ruin the surprise."

Carefully, Ranboo sets the gifts down on the counter, rubbing his arms where they'd been previously weighing on them. Beside him, Tubbo removes the balloons from where they're wrapped around his wrist, tying it around one of the smaller presents.

"Why are you leaving one?" Ranboo points out, poking the last string wrapped around his friend's wrist.

Tubbo smiles a little, turning towards Ranboo.

"I figured it'd be nice to bring him a balloon when we find him," he says, tugging a little on the string. "I think he'd appreciate that."

Ranboo purses their lips a little.

The way Tubbo's talking about him, almost as if he's dead or something— it brings a weighing sort of unease onto Ranboo's shoulders.

They don't point it out, though, knowing that Tubbo would just dismiss it. Even if he did talk in the past tense, it wasn't like him to fully acknowledge the fact that someone could possibly be dead. He was nothing if not full of hope. Ranboo both envied and worried for him.

With an exhale, Tubbo claps his hands together, one last glance around the apartment before making a decision.

"I think we should start to head out now," Tubbo turns towards the door, beginning to exit. He pauses in the doorway, just by the splintered door (that they'll probably have to end up fixing



as an additional present). "We should check Eldritch Wings first, just because he usually has his Nook's shift late at night."

Ranboo nods, turning away from Tubbo to look at Oswald again. The axoltol is still swimming around excitedly, as though it hadn't seen anyone in a while. Ranboo hopes that it's just how it acts.

"I'll be out in a second," he says, waving at Tubbo dismissively. "Just going to feed Oswald for Tommy."

Tubbo scoffs, leaning against the doorframe.

"Don't overfeed my axolotl," he comments bitterly. Ranboo can feel a glare boring into the back of their head.

Ranboo just rolls their eyes, picking up the small canister of axolotl food. Tubbo was still stuck on that whole '*Oswald was stolen from me wrongfully*' thing. Sure, it was true, but he wasn't going to admit that.

Humming, Ranboo unscrews the canister, tilting it over the top of the tank.

Eagerly Oswald floats near the top, ready to feed.

As Ranboo is screwing the lid back onto the food canister, there's a clutter in the next room over. It's loud, sharp, and he hears a slight sizzling noise that puts him off a tad. Quickly, his heart leaps into his throat and he drops the little food tin back onto the countertop.

"Tommy?" he calls quietly, inching around the kitchen counter. The noise had come from one of the only other rooms in the small ass apartment; the bedroom. Tommy rarely even went in there in the first place unless it was to watch the stars. Apparently, he could see them much better from his bedroom than he could in the living room or something like that. Once,

Ranboo had offered to move the sofa into there with Tubbo's help, but Tommy had just shrugged, claiming it didn't matter.

There's another moment of silence, and then the bedroom door creaks open. Ranboo's hand goes to the knife on his hip the second he sees the flash of lime green. It was a small bit of information, something that he was certain Tommy hadn't meant for him to know (or remember, either) but somehow it had etched itself across his memory like a branding.

Tommy had once said, words slurred by exhaustion and the aftermath of the Banquet still resting against his tongue, that if Ranboo ever saw anything resembling a neon green in his apartment to know that it was never him. Tommy never wore anything even close to green. According to him, it was his least favourite colour. Tommy never said why, but with one glance at the number one hero of Manberg, he didn't exactly *have* to say why.

Ranboo has their knife out in an instant— an obsidian dagger glittering with amethysts and one emerald near the hilt— placing the blade directly against the intruder's neck without a second thought. He hadn't even seen their face, their body language, nothing; it was a second instinctual move that Ranboo didn't even know they had in them.

It takes one second, then two, and their shoulders relax, eyebrows pulling together. The person that they're holding against the wall— if you can even call them a person— is watching them with wide eyes and raised eyebrows. They aren't exactly scared, but they aren't particularly angry, either. Their skin is a translucent green thing, dripping onto the carpet and sticking against Ranboo's blade.

"Hey, hey, woah, there!" They say, their voice a vaguely echoing thing, as if they're talking through gelatin or something. It would be amusing if Ranboo wasn't currently in full defense mode. Slowly, they raise their hands up defensively, not making any move to fight back. "No need to have the knife out or anything, friend. I don't plan on hurting you— I haven't even got weapons or anything, actually!"

Ranboo raises an eyebrow, keeping the knife to their neck. He wasn't even sure if this blade would pierce their... skin, or whatever it was they were made out of. Ranboo wasn't judging, of course. If anything, they were slightly intrigued to know more about it, but they shove the thought away.

"Who the hell are you?" Ranboo questions after a moment, their grip loosening just barely on the blade as they fully realize this was not, in fact, Morpheus. That didn't change that this person was inside of Tommy's house, though, and most likely had some sort of idea on where he could've gone.

The hybrid grins a little, lowering one of their hands to hold it out, as if going in for a handshake.

"Name's Charlie Slimecicle!" They say cheerily, and Ranboo blinks. "I'm from Las— I'm— oh, crap. Well, uh, anyways! I use he slash him pronouns. It's great to meet you! Please put the knife down!"

'Las...' something. Ranboo had no clue what that meant, but hopefully he wouldn't have to find out. (See: potentially destroying a building that may be harbouring one of his best friends).

"Okay, Charlie Slimecicle," Ranboo says his name slowly, "What the hell are you doing in Tommy's house?"

Charlie's grin widens at this, putting his hand down (Ranboo does feel a tad bad about not shaking his hand, but, well... he still had no clue if this guy was even a good person or not).

"I am looking for Tommy Innit!" He says, glancing around the room as if expecting the guy to just pop up out of nowhere or something. "Have you seen him? He hasn't been responding to Q— I mean, mine or my *friend's* texts. We are worried about him. See, it's his birthday, and—"

Ranboo exhales, shoulders drooping. He lowers the knife from the person's neck and huffs.

"No, I haven't seen him," they grumble, watching Charlie frown a little at this. "I was actually, uh... sorry" Ranboo motions wildly in the air with the knife, "for the whole knife thing. I thought that you might've hurt him or something because my friend and I are looking for him and haven't found him yet."

Charlie nods at this, humming sympathetically.

"I get it, I get it," he responds, tone still a cheery thing. "It's scary not being able to find your friend. I can help, though! I am naturally good at finding people. It's part of my hybridity!"

At this, Ranboo raises an eyebrow, wiping the blade of his dagger on the side of his pants to get the green gunk off of it.

"Your hybridity?" They question.

"Yep!" Charlie clicks his tongue, clapping his hands together and then pulling them apart. With it, green... slime, almost, pulls apart. "I'm a Slime hybrid! Couldn't you tell? Quackity always tells me it's very obvious."

Quackity— another name to add to the list, Ranboo supposes.

"It is pretty obvious, I guess," Ranboo wonders how they hadn't seen it sooner. A Slime hybrid; those were incredibly rare, if not completely extinct. He could've sworn that the last one spotted alive was around one hundred years ago or something. Then again, most history books lie, so he supposes that his information can never be completely accurate.

He clears his throat, dismissing the thought from his head once more. As interesting as Slime hybrids were (Lord, he can imagine Tubbo bouncing on his heels once he sees this guy already), there was a far more important matter at hand. "My name's Ranboo. He slash they."

"Hi, Ranboo! I definitely did not already know that!" Charlie chirps, pressing his hands together. Ranboo's eyes narrow, but, well... too much to process right now. One step at a time. Hopefully they could come back to that at a later time.

"So, uh, you can help us find Tommy?" Ranboo changes the subject anxiously, watching Charlie nod slowly. He blinks then adds, "How, exactly?"

Charlie's grin never seems to disappear, somehow, and they take a few steps towards the wall.

"Like this!" They say enthusiastically, before completely dissolving through the wall in a mesh of slime particles. The very sight of it is enough to make Ranboo's heart nearly stop beating. Absolutely horrifying, especially when a few seconds pass and it happens all over again, the green particles forming themselves back into the form of a five foot eight Charlie Slimecicle.

"What... the hell was that?" Ranboo whispers, blinking a few times as he tries to calculate what just happened. Sure, he's seen some crazy ass shit in his life (like that time Tubbo picked Tommy up, all the way over his head, and tossed him into the lake without even a bead of sweat appearing on his forehead. Ranboo swore that they'd never pick on Tubbo ever again after that). However, this was just strange. Like, *horror movie* strange.

Flicking a piece of drywall off of his... gelatin skin, Charlie just hums, "It's my superpower! I can go through walls. Kind of like how you can teleport, you know?"

Oh, lord. Ranboo thinks they're going to have to book a session with Puffy after this one.

Carefully massaging the area between their eyes, they exhale, "How exactly did you know that I could teleport? I've got my suppressor on right now."

Charlie just hums again, a cheery little tone.

"I just know!" He says, and Ranboo opens their eyes to give the Slime hybrid a constipated look. "Anyways, I can help you look for Tommy, so long as you let me tell my best friend about the adventure! He's very worried."

At this, Ranboo raises an eyebrow. So, this 'Quackity' was worried for Tommy. It was strange; he'd never heard anything about a Quackity coming from Tommy. Maybe it was just a topic he'd never brought up, or maybe it was something more. Either way, his internal 'best friend is in potential trouble' alarms were sounding.

"Alright," he gives in, leaning against the wall and sheathing his dagger. He runs his hands up his face, breathing in and breathing out to calm his nerves. "Alright. Just... don't give them too many details, alright? I don't exactly know who to trust right now and you're not exactly..." they trail off, opening one eye to look at Charlie, who has their communicator out with one hand, looking at them curiously with their head tilted.

He looks almost like a curious dog waiting for a bone. It's irritating, so Ranboo clears his throat— a nervous habit, really— and signs off on something much kinder than he'd originally planned. "I've only known you for like, five minutes. You uh, understand my apprehension, hopefully?"

Charlie blinks, then smiles. As far as Ranboo can tell, it's genuine.

"Of course, Ranboo," he chirps, looking back down to his communicator and clicking a few buttons. "I will not tell Quackity too much about you, I promise. I will just let him know that we are searching for Tommy Innit so that he doesn't worry. I keep telling him to drink a sparkling water or something to calm his nerves but he doesn't listen to m. Really, he's a bit of a dumbass, but he's my best friend, so..."

As Charlie continues to ramble, Ranboo frowns a little.

He isn't so sure how telling Tommy's supposed friend, *"Oh hey, by the way, one of your friends, the one you've been looking for? They're kind of missing,"* would be reassuring. Then again, if he was in this friend's shoes (and he sort of is, if he thinks about it), he wouldn't want to be kept out of the loop, so he supposes it makes sense.

Plus, Charlie knows this 'friend' far more than Ranboo ever would.

Clearing his throat, Ranboo glances towards the front entrance. Tubbo's long gone by this point, already halfway to Eldritch Wings, knowing him.

"Alright, well, I'm going to go catch up to my friend," Ranboo motions towards the splintered door, internally grimacing when he sees it again. They really would have to clean that up before Tommy gets home. Hopefully now they'd have a bit more time with this whole situation, as horrible as it sounded. "I've gotta let him know that you're going to help and stuff."

Charlie nods eagerly, holding the communicator up. The display name reads '*Big Man Q*' in bright letters. Ranboo can't help but, just vaguely, be reminded of Tommy by it.

"Quackity's calling me! I'll be out there in a minute, though."

Ranboo just nods, "Take your time. I'm sure Tubbo's taken off so just... met us at Eldritch Wings, if you know where that is? Oh, and also, you might want to put on a hybrid suppressor when we go out. We shouldn't be attracting too many looks while we're looking for him."

Charlie nods at this, producing a little charm bracelet that looks exactly like the one Tommy wears. Ranboo's eyebrows knit together as the Slime hybrid waves it around, the ruby gleaming in the sunlight coming in from the window.

He'd known that Tommy was a hybrid of some sort, but this practically confirmed it.

"I'll meet you at Tommy's workplace, don't worry, Ranboo of Manberg!" Charlie reassures, pressing the green button on his call and putting it to his ear, "I know wh— hello, Quackity from Las Nevadas!" Charlie's sentence does an entire 180, his full attention being grabbed by the friend on the phone (who, just vaguely, Ranboo can hear talking loudly over the receiver. As they expected, the friend wasn't taking this info very lightly).

With a vague wave, Ranboo awkwardly turns on his heel and heads out the front door. A strange interaction but at least they had a new ally, if nothing else? He just hopes that Charlie will actually be able to find Tommy's workplace.

---

Phil grimaces underneath his mask as he leans down beside the glowing green goop that's on the floor. He tilts his head a little, reaching a gloved hand out as if to touch it, only to recoil.

He leans back on his heels, looking up to Techno, who is standing beside him with a scowl resting on his face.

"What the fuck is it?" He asks, even though he already knows that Techno hasn't got a clue. A natural response to bewilderment.

"No idea," Techno responds anyway, shrugging his shoulders back. "It wasn't here the night of the Banquet— at least, not that I can remember. If it *was* here, then the hosts hid it well."

Phil huffs, standing up straight and leaning away.

"Have you tried calling anyone about it?" he asks, glancing at Techno, who has pulled up his mask to get a better look at the stuff. In the dim light, Phil can see the way the green pigment reflects off of Techno's face. He hadn't been lying when he said it was quite literally glowing.

Techno scoffs, glancing up at Phil.

"Who do you recommend we call, Phil? The Goop Exterminators?"

Hilarious.

"Actually, I was thinking someone that we might know that's actually got an idea of what this could be," Phil clicks his tongue, shifting a little and crossing his arms. "Know of any of our allies that could be a candidate?"



There's a pause, and then Techno stands up straight as well, dusting any potential grains of gravel or residue from the burning building off of his clothing.

"How about Cosmos?" he begins, still staring into the green's glow. "He works for you, doesn't he? I'm pretty sure that he's pretty neutral in the whole 'hero vs. villain' ordeal."

Phil hums a little, considering it. It was true, Karl wasn't too big on getting involved in the hero or villain matters— all he wanted to do was time jump and study his crystals. He was a great person to be allied with, but he tended not to pick sides unless he had to.

This was a situation he'd probably only get involved in for the intrigue.

So, he shrugs.

"Sure," he mumbles, producing his phone from his robes pocket, glancing up at Techno as he scrolls through his contacts. "What's the harm?"

The phone rings twice before the vigilante picks up.

*"Hello?"*

Phil steps a few paces away from the goo and Techno, pressing the device against his ear.

"Hey, Karl," Phil clears his throat a little. The dust in this place really wasn't doing wonders for his lungs— it was a wonder how Wilbur hadn't been bedridden for longer. (Right; the guy couldn't fucking sit still). "It's Phil, I was just wondering if you were free right now?"

Karl hums on the other line, *"I think so. Why? Do I need to come in or something? It's pretty late."*

"No, no, it's... more as a *favour*," Phil stresses the word, hoping that Karl gets exactly the weight of it. He taps his long fingernail against the case of his phone and clicks his tongue, "We've got a bit of a situation— *we* meaning Techno and I..."

He thinks, then adds for dramatics (and because it's probably true), "And, potentially, the entirety of Manberg, if we aren't careful."

A moment of silence, and then Karl sighs.

*"Yeah, yeah, I can head over there I think,"* there's a scuffle on the other line and Phil can only presume that he's gathering his outfit. *"Where exactly is the situation and what do I need to bring with me?"*

Phil glances in Techno's direction, raising an eyebrow. The man just shrugs, tilting his head back in the direction of the glowing green goop stuck to the ground.

"Bring all your potions and shit," he says, watching the way the goop almost pulses, as if it has a heartbeat. "A gas mask, too. We're at the Banquet Hall that got blown to shit, if you recall. There's a lot of dust in the air and, frankly, I doubt the 'situation' we have here is safe to breathe in, either."

Karl hums and something brushes against the receiver on the other line.

*"I'll be there in ten,"* he promises before promptly hanging up.

Phil pulls the phone away from his ear, giving Techno a look.

"He said he'd be here in ten," he tells him, and Techno raises an eyebrow.

"Ten? Ten what? Minutes or hours?" He begins, only to flinch when there's a loud *vwoop* from just behind him.

With the sound comes a portal, colours of white and purple swirling like the storms in a Nether portal. It's always slightly disorienting to see Karl's time jump appear out of nowhere, especially with Phil's personal experiences with portal jumping. He'd never gone through a time loop himself, but he had gone to the Other Realms. Beside him, Techno shudders, clearly thinking the same thing.

Vaguely amused, Phil clears his throat.

"I guess he meant ten *seconds*," he murmurs, casting Techno a grin. He can't see the man's expression but with the way his shoulders tense, Phil can only assume he's vaguely irritated. Especially when he huffs gruffly, turning away from his father and standing off to the side.

Phil composes himself, walking up to Karl, who is currently dusting... sparkles, or whatever they are, off of his cloak. It swirls around his ankles in gusts of cosmos and stars, appearing almost like he's got the entire time jump portal attached to his back. It's always fascinating to look at, but Phil's not exactly here to talk fashion.

(That was typically Wilbur's job, but his other son had opted to go patrolling instead. Lord... he should be resting).

"Hey, Archangel," Karl greets, snapping Phil from his thoughts.

"Just Philza's fine," he responds, waving his hand. "We're in the field, but there's just us three here. There's no need to worry."

Karl shrugs with a hum, the green goop clearly catching his eye suddenly. Without another thought, he walks up to it, bending down before it. His next words are more of a whisper than anything, and although they are directed towards Phil, they sound more dreamlike.

"Always gotta be on the lookout," he says, inching closer to the goop with an eyebrow raise. "You never can be too careful here, especially with lifeforms we don't know much about."

Karl's voice trails off from his sentence as he examines the green stuff closer, nose wrinkling. His eyes are wide with wonder, though, the way they typically are when Phil orders him another book on planets from out of town, his head tilting this way and that.

Techno steals a glance over the top of the vigilante's head towards Phil, who is suppressing a smirk. Techno had inevitably been right with picking Cosmos of all people. He was incredibly smart when it came to this kind of stuff.

"So, what do you think of it?" Phil questions, shifting from one foot to another as Karl sets his bag of tools on one of the chairs that hadn't been entirely decimated during the Banquet.

The man doesn't respond immediately, rustling through his things and pulling out a magnifying glass and some other device Phil can't quite name— vials of some sort, maybe?— before leaning towards the goop dangerously close. Phil has to fight back the automatic reaction to pull Karl back away from it. Clearly, the guy knows what he's doing, but still.

It could be radioactive, for all they know.

"It looks familiar," Karl states after a moment, leaning back away from it, pressing a finger to his temple the way he does when thinking intently. Wilbur has always teased him about it, saying he looked like a funky cartoon character; Karl has never once taken that as an insult, though. "I can't quite say it's alien or anything without testing it, but from first glance, I think that it's of this world." A pause, then he adds, "From this *realm*, though, maybe not."

At this, Techno and Phil tense.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Techno's the first to question, for once.

Karl hums, shrugging a little.

"It looks familiar to something I've studied before," he readjusts his goggles, meeting Techno's eyes, "You are a Piglin hybrid, right?"

Techno shifts uncomfortably. Not exactly a comfortable subject.

"I am," he responds gruffly, glancing away.

"Do you remember anything about what it's like there? The plants, the ores, all of that?" Karl waves his hand holding the microscope a little, using the free one to wipe the back of his nose. Undoubtedly, the ash was affecting him too, even though Phil had tried to tell him to bring a gas mask. Why did nobody listen to him?

"I do. A lot more than I wish I did, actually," is Techno's grim response, and then he frowns. "Do you think it could be from there, then?"

Karl puffs his cheeks out, tapping the microscope against his knee.

"I'd have to run a few tests, obviously," he begins, pausing for a moment. He clicks his tongue, turning back to the goop. "But just by first glance, I think it could be. It's either there or... well, you know. The other place."

Phil's jaw sets.

"How long will it take to get the results for the test?" Techno speaks for him, shooting a glance in Phil's direction.

Carefully, the vigilante turns and produces a small vial from his bag alongside a cotton swab. As delicately as possible, he twirls the cotton against the goop and plops it into the vial, sealing it off with a cap.

"Mm, maybe two or three days, give or take?" Karl shrugs lightly, perfectly calm with this situation. Techno couldn't help but envy him, if just a little bit. He may resonate a calm aura but he was, internally, losing his shit. Not out of fear, mostly curiosity. "It shouldn't take forever. We've got some good equipment at the Lab. I'll just call you when it comes in."

Phil nods at this, fingers tapping against his forearm. His expression is clouded, a mixture of thought and slight concern playing a symphony with his features. If one looked hard enough underneath the shadow displayed across his face from the hat, or the beaked plague mask, they'd see the slightest traces of fear.

"Thank you, Karl," he says quietly, taking a step back. "I really appreciate you coming here, it's—"

A loud ringing cuts Phil off, and he frowns. Nobody really called him during his job. He specifically kept his ringer on silent during patrol. The only people whose calls actually went through during this time were the ones on his 'Importants' list, a little star next to their name that enabled their calls to ring whenever.

Quickly— and whilst ignoring the concerned look from Techno— he pulls his phone from his pocket.

"Excuse me for a moment," he says hurriedly to Karl, excusing himself and walking to the other side of the room. While stepping over debris and more of the green veins, he presses the answer button and presses the receiver to his ear. "Hey, Wil? You okay?"

There's quiet on the other end, and his heart leaps into his throat, the fear doubling by a tenfold.

"Wilbur?" He repeats anxiously, "Please talk to me, kiddo."

More silence.

"This isn't funny, Wil," he hisses into the receiver, trying his best to keep himself calm. "If this is one of your pr—"

*"It was Tommy,"* Wilbur whispers. It's so quiet, so incredibly broken that the words Phil wants to speak disintegrate on his tongue.

Tommy.

What was Tommy?

He can't remember anything that could subject 'Tommy' as something, other than the worst. Had he been a missing person on television or something, or someone that had died? The worst case scenario forces Phil to nearly drive all the way back home, but he holds his ground.

*Calm*, he tells himself. *Keep it together— if not for him, for yourself.*

So, he breathes, and then asks the million dollar question.

"What do you mean?"

Another silence, and then Wilbur breaks, sobbing into the receiver. He starts rambling, a constant storm of words that breach into Phil's mind. Once, they'd gone to see Puffy and, being the licensed therapist that she is, told Wilbur that it was his form of 'trying to feel comfort.' Talking at a constant, without halting, was his way to sort of 'ground himself' when nothing else worked.

Phil's stomach drops as he presses the phone to his ear, eyebrows pulling together while he does his best to make out what it is Wilbur's saying. It's a little difficult to understand over the dry heaving, the pain clear in his voice. Phil has to do everything he can to stop himself from leaving the Hall immediately.

If Wilbur was in trouble, he could typically handle it. Plus, he hadn't called the night before during his patrol. Usually if he couldn't handle himself, he'd make sure to call Techno before he called Phil, as the former was usually not as busy.

"Slow down, Wil, slow down," Phil whispers, shushing his son gently. He reaches a hand out, barely caring as he holds onto the soot covered wall, fingernails digging into it to try and keep himself steady. "Can you repeat from the beginning, kiddo? I want to help you. Take some deep breaths— remember when we were counting a couple weeks ago? Can you do that for me again?"

Wilbur lets out a shaky breath, and the rustling against the receiver tells Phil that he's nodding.

"Tell me what's wrong," he says after a pause, glancing over his shoulder to see Techno's skull-mask from across the room. The way his eldest son holds himself reads clear worry. He can only wonder how the Voices are acting up right now. He tips his head a little, the emerald dangling from his hat twisting and twirling. Hopefully, it sends Techno a message; something like, *'It's okay, don't worry yet.'*

Phil turns his head, once more giving his full attention to his second eldest.

"You still there with me, Wil?" He murmurs, tapping his finger anxiously against the back of his phone.

A pause, and then the man's talking again. It all comes out in a burst, with heaves in between words, but it isn't as shaky as it was before.

"The witness, Phil. I— I saw him, I chased him, I... I nearly *killed* him. He was the witness, the one I kept telling you about? It was him. It was *Tommy*," Wilbur's voice cracks and then he's repeating the sentence over and over again, the shaky 'It was him' the only thing in Phil's ears.



For a couple seconds, it's just Phil and his son's sobs over the phone, and then there's something else.

Distantly, Phil hears someone yell his name, but he ignores it.

To hell with villains, to hell with vengeance, to hell with whatever it was that had invaded the now destroyed Banquet Hall. To fucking *hell* with the heroes that could've been involved, or whoever had done this.

His son— no, *sons*— needed him, and not a single thing, not even a fucking potential new lifeform was going to stop him.

---

*It's so cold here.*

*Tommy's fingertips feel as though someone's dipped them in a bucket of ice water, pulled them out, only to shove him— whole soul and all— into the river.*

*There's a ringing in his ears, and someone brushes the hair from his forehead. He leans into it expectantly, eyes remaining closed, the darkness overcoming, like a swirling hole. His back feels numb, frigid, burning but no longer with the iron-rod sting that he'd once felt.*

*He can't think, cannot fathom where he is or even who he is. The only thing that is really keeping him afloat is the gentle rocking that he feels, the slight warmth emanating from his left.*

*Maybe he's dead; maybe he's not. Whichever it is, he's far too gone to care.*

*Something light, something feathery, wraps around him and engulfs him in a warmth he hadn't felt in so long. He turns, stirs just barely, but the pain that would greet him with*

*resurfacing for air is too much to bear. The rocking, the gentle swaying underneath him that he cannot understand in the depths of his mind, pulled underwater and drowning, is nice, if nothing else.*

*Overhead, slightly muffled by the warbling of water that crashes against his mind and his ears, he can hear someone whisper "I've got you."*

*There's genuinity, he can feel it even without knowing where he is, or even who he is at this point. It's with this, and the gentle breeze pulling hair from his forehead, that he allows himself to drift for what feels like the first time.*

---

Jack blinks, a frown crossing his face at the rather frazzled looking Tubbo and Ranboo standing on the other side of the front desk. Standing with them— which is the most peculiar of them all— is some random dude that just looks like your average guy named Joe or something.

To add to the oddity, Tubbo's got a balloon wrapped around his wrist. A singular balloon and it's deflated, dragging across the cafe floor. What the fuck.

It doesn't look at all like Tubbo cares, though, his knuckles white as he grips the front countertop. If looks could kill, Jack figures that he'd be six feet below the ground.

"Uh," he begins, blinking a little. He glances around at the partially empty diner (not many people came at two pm, most being at work or busy). "Did you guys want to order something...? Tommy's not in right now, but Sam—"

"Where the fuck is Tommy?" Tubbo interjects, tone like a sharp dagger.

Jack frowns.

"I just told you. He's not in right now, but—" he begins to say.

"Then where *is* he?" Tubbo interrupts again, his tone a hiss.

It was a slightly good question, he supposes. Tommy was supposed to come into work after his shift and he hadn't gotten a call or anything from him yet (well, he only got a call from Tommy if the kid needed something— more like, *Sam* hadn't gotten a call yet). Sure, it was worrying, but Tommy only really worked graveyard shifts, so he probably just skipped a day to call ahead of time.

"I'd say he's at his other job?" Jack shrugs, plucking a thread off of his black and blue striped jumper. He can feel that random ass guy's eyes on him, as if looking into his very soul despite not saying a word. It's creepy, but he continues as if he hasn't even seen him. "I don't know, man. I don't keep track of where Tommy is. Do I look like his dad or something?"

Tubbo's eyebrows furrow more, but before he can hurl an insult Jack's way, Ranboo speaks.

"He wasn't at Eldritch Wings," they begin, tone slightly shaky. Beside them, the random guy blinks owlishly behind his glasses, patting Ranboo warily on the arm as if to say, *You've got this*. Ranboo gives them a strained, but thankful, smile. "It's his birthday today. We were going to surprise him, but we couldn't find him. We've checked everywhere. That little pond he named after himself, his other workplace, his house... but we can't find him. He's nowhere."

That was... news, in more ways than one.

It was a little stanching for Jack to realize, *oh shit*, he'd never known when Tommy's birthday was. The fact only worsened the pooling guilt in his stomach when he realized that he hadn't even gotten the kid a birthday present or anything. It wasn't like he *should* get him a present— they were hardly even friends, if friends at all.

Of course, *he* knew that they were friends, although he wouldn't admit it. Reading Tommy had slowly, but progressively, grown a tad easier. Not completely (he still had no clue what went on in that kid's brain everytime he'd drift off into a daydream), but it was enough to know that his aggressive nature was just another form of 'expressing affection,' or whatever. Disgusting, but it was obvious.

Plus, now that he thought about it... Tommy had gotten *him* a birthday present for his birthday. Sure, it was simply a pastry he'd stolen from the back room and then chucked at his head, but it still counted (especially when he'd actually looked at it and seen 'Bday Jack' written in scraggly, childlike chicken scratch. It was endearing, but he never mentioned it for fear he'd get slapped or something).

"Have you asked Sam?" He asks once he's come back to reality, shaking his head to try and ward off the thoughts. The task at hand was that Tommy was missing, not just that it was the kid's birthday. "He usually knows where Tommy's at. They talk pretty often over the phone."

"That's who I came for," Tubbo pipes up with an eye roll, shooting Jack a glare, "But you just had to get in the way. Arsehole."

Jack's nose wrinkles. So, Tubbo didn't like him either. Maybe Tommy told him a thing or two, or maybe he was just against bald people. The trend grows, but his hair never does.

He turns towards the back room, setting his jaw so that he doesn't insult a customer— again — and knocks on the door.

It's a couple minutes before Sam appears, opening it with a wide grin. He's covered in flour and Fran yips at his heels, running in circles between his ankles. When the door opens a tad wider, she takes off from Sam's side, sniffing around the counter as if looking for Tommy.

Jack resists the urge to roll his eyes. Everyone in this fucking town, even Sam's dog, cared for that kid. He pointedly ignored his own thoughts on the matter.

"Hey, Tubbo, Ranboo... and friend," Sam greets over Jack's shoulder, walking past him. He brushes his flour covered hands off on one of the dish rags, looking a tad more happy than

usual, particularly so when he spots the gifts and balloons the two kids are holding.

"My name's Charlie Slimecicle," The random guy bursts out, holding out his hand enthusiastically. It's as though he's been waiting for the moment to introduce himself. Vaguely, Jack's reminded of one of the kids back in the Complex... but, no. They couldn't be the same. Theseus was dead, after all.

Sam blinks, then smiles.

"Hello, Charlie Slimecicle," he greets, leaning over the counter to shake his hand, "Careful, I probably have some flour leftover on my hands, but it's nice to meet you. My name's Sam."

A pause, and Sam frowns as he's shaking Charlie's hand.

"Wait, I know you, don't I?" He questions, not letting go of the new guy's hand. He tilts his head, examining them, and then letting go. "You're Tommy's friend, right? I'm pretty sure I've seen you pick him up from here before. The guy with the... shiny limousine?"

If possible, Charlie's smile grows exponentially wider, glittering happily.

"That was me," he says, tone incredibly enthusiastic. "I'm glad you recognized me, Sam from Nook's. It's great to see you again."

Blinking, Sam nods, although it's slightly wary. Jack understood where he came from. Not very many people in Manberg were this cheery nowadays; not with the whole Schlatt situation, nor the Syndicate working underground. It was all a wreck.

"So," Sam chances courses, leaning his weight against the countertop. He turns his attention to Tubbo and Ranboo as well now, eyebrow raised, "How can I help you guys?"

"Tommy," Ranboo speaks up, and his tone must read with something that Sam understands, because the man's smile fades. His hands come down from the dishrag, eyebrows pulling together. Fran returns to his side from around the counter, taking a seat just beside his feet and looking up at him. Jack imagines, if she could speak, she'd be wondering where Tommy was out loud as well.

"Is he okay?" Sam questions, eyes flitting to Jack for a moment, who shifts uneasily. He feels as though he shouldn't be in the center of this conversation; again, he and Tommy weren't exactly the closest of friends, unlike Sam and the other two.

"We..." Ranboo's voice dies, and they tap anxiously against the presents clutched in their arms. "We don't know. We can't exactly find him."

Sam stiffens at this, and then he sighs. He tips his head in the direction of the backroom, glancing around at the different customers sitting in booths, all of which have now turned their attention in their direction.

"Let's talk in the back," he suggests, keeping his tone low. He looks over at Jack, something almost sympathetic crossing his face. "Can you manage for another hour or so before Niki comes in?"

Trying to ignore the way that his heart drops a little, Jack nods. Sam sends him a strained smile, holding the back room door's open so that Ranboo and Tubbo can hurriedly walk inside, Fran hot on their heels.

There's a moment, just before Sam enters, where his smile becomes a little more genuine.

"Thank you, Jack," he says, and Jack just nods.

Really, what more can he do?

Sam hums a little, hands pressing against the counter in the back room. Ranboo leans against the wall, Tommy's presents settled on the little table where— ironically— the boy used to sit during breaks. It was funny; the kid never really sat in a chair properly, always choosing to sit on the edge of tables. Sam probably should have scolded him for it, but he never did. It was slightly (not admittedly, ever) endearing to see.

Now, though, Tubbo and Charlie take his place, with Tubbo sitting in the chair right at the table, fingers tapping anxiously against the top of it. Charlie Slimecicle is sitting on the floor, weirdly enough, his back leaning against one of the legs of the table.

Sam wonders, distantly, if he's comfortable like that. He'd offer elsewhere to sit, but the tension of the room was currently solemn and cold as ice. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth, movements slow.

Tommy was, apparently, missing. It wasn't confirmed, obviously. Tommy disappearing out of nowhere was normal, but the weird thing about this case was that he never just left without a trace. He always called, he always let somebody know, *'Hey! I'll be gone, and here's why.'*

The thought that Tommy hadn't done that this time leaves a sickly feeling pooling in the pit of Sam's stomach. He tries to shake it away, though. There could always be a reason. Maybe he's just sick again and can't get... no, Tubbo, Ranboo, and Charlie had searched his apartment (Sam narrowly avoids the question of 'how') and didn't find him.

Now that he was thinking about it, there was a reason that they should be worried. The kid could be anywhere— stuck in a gutter, getting mugged, really, anything. Maybe Sam's rather buried fatherly instincts were sounding alarms or maybe he was just, like everyone else, *human*. He decided to pick the latter, just to subdue the already overwhelming cloud pressing against his brain.

The question at hand was where Tommy could actually be. They'd already outruled his apartment, his other job, the park he stayed at, and here; where else was there? It felt like they were all collectively missing somewhere big here.

He pauses, lifting his hand just barely from the counter and turns to them. They've been watching him, heads tilted (in perfect unison, it was pretty funny how similar the three of them were).

"Have you spoken to Wilbur about this?" he questions. It was probably the only reasonable explanation for the situation.

Wilbur was one of Sam's regulars for a while, but it was typically during the day; anyone out of his little family circle came during the night, most specifically Phil or one of their little *'oooh look I'm rich so I have errand people.'*

Whatever. Sam hadn't cared all that much until he'd started taking a liking to Tommy. Coming around more often, bickering with one another, and taking him home, all the weird shit. Tommy apparently cared for him a lot, too.

*We're like brothers, I'm sure,* he'd once told Sam, traces of a smile settled on his face. He hadn't met his eyes. *That family is my family, I think. They gave me an emerald and everything. Their mother loves me.*

It had sounded genuine enough, and Sam was happy for him. He'd always be happy for Tommy, but now, standing in a room with the kid missing, he couldn't help but feel fear.

If there was anyone that knew where he was when there was no one else to turn to, it was the Crafts.

"I tried calling him," Ranboo begins, fidgeting anxiously with their hands. To their right, Sam can see a strange expression crossing Tubbo's face, as if he's realizing something for the first time. Sam isn't so sure he wants to know what it may be. "He didn't... he didn't pick up."

"Who is Wilbur?" Charlie pipes up from his spot under the table. He's fidgeting with a bracelet on his wrist. In the fluorescents, Sam can see the flash of a red gem. "Is he a friend of Tommy's?"



"One of his best friends," Sam explains warily. He's starting not to feel so great about this. Wilbur wasn't exactly a shady character, but Sam never had been too fond of the guy. He gave him sort of... *the quiet one that would definitely shoot you in the head* vibes or something. "Tommy's called him his brother in front of me before. All of the Crafts, really. He's taken a liking to them."

"Wilbur's called him that in front of me, too," Tubbo says, sounding strange, as if slowly realizing something. "Not just Wilbur, though. All of Wilbur's family— Techno, Phil... they're acting like Tommy's a part of their family at this point."

A pause, and then Tubbo groans, slamming his hands to his face. Sam blinks in slight shock, but Ranboo doesn't seem all that surprised. Tubbo must do this frequently.

"Fuck!" He hisses into his hands, running them through his hair. "How the fuck didn't we see it? Fucking hell, Ranboo, they're literally a part of the villain underground. How didn't we see it? It was clear as fucking day, and we were blind. Blind! And now here we are, with Tommy missing and Wilbur won't answer the god damn phone. He *always* answers the phone, even if he's in the shower!"

Sam stiffens and Ranboo's eyes widen. Underneath the table, Charlie frowns, looking a mixture of confused and slightly concerned.

The tension in the air tightens, like a thread ready to snap. It remains like that for a moment, and Sam almost feels like he's going to suffocate. Villains... surely they couldn't mean who he was thinking of, right? Tubbo had mispoken, or was talking about more of the *underground* villains. Someone he hadn't heard of, or maybe someone that was on the spectrum of morally gray.

It couldn't be anyone *that* bad. Tommy wasn't in danger, surely. He was okay. Maybe he was just exploring, doing normal teenager things.

The silence thickens, and then it breaks.

"*That Wilbur Craft?*" Charlie begins, his tone lilted a tad. His eyebrows are pulled together in thought, the eyes behind his square glasses swirling with emotions Sam can't begin to name, but he's hanging onto every word. *Please*, he begs internally, to any God that will listen, even though he's not once believed in them. *Please, let me be wrong.*

Charlie speaks again, and the whole world comes crashing down.

"Do you mean the Wilbur Craft from the Syndicate?"

---

Tommy doesn't know where he is. Not exactly, anyways.

He should know, of course— he's the one who carried himself there, who shakenly opened the door and fell into one of the corners of the room, curling up against one of the walls.

Still, though, he has no idea where *here* is. Wherever he may be, though, is far better than where he was. Anywhere close to his house, anywhere that isn't close enough to Manberg's walls for him to flee at any given moment, would make him feel sick to his stomach.

The second he'd gotten that text from Quackity, he'd acted in a state of dreamlike nature. He'd grabbed one of his hoodies that wasn't the one the Bard knew so well (that one he'd left back at home, buried underneath trash in his apartment complex's dumpster, hoping that if someone may find it, they'll think him dead). Tommy had fed Oswald, turned all the lights off, and left.

He hadn't left a note this time. Normally if he goes somewhere during the day, or if he wants to be alone, he leaves a note; whether it's a little Post-It of chicken scratch pasted onto the front of the refrigerator, or just a simple *'I'm going out, am safe'* text sent to one of his friends. He didn't do that. Not today, and never again.

It's better, he believes, if they think he's dead. He was given mercy by the very person he thought that his life would be snuffed from; a dramatic irony that made his jaw clench. It was fucking stupid. Mercy— mercy, granted to him by the fucking *Bard*, one of the Syndicate's most prominent members. The thought almost pissed him off more than confused him.

He could almost hear Dream's stupid voice in the back of his head, jeering at him that he should be grateful that he's even alive in the first place. He waves the thought away, pressing his back against one of the walls of the tiny ass flat (if that's even what it is). Dream had tried to kill him and he'd nearly succeeded. There was nothing Tommy wanted to do with him now other than kill him.

It's too late, though, he figures, starting to pace lengthways across the flat, doing his best to ignore the scent of ash that invades his nose. He had his opportunity to kill that fucker during the Banquet, to watch as he and everyone else that had made his and Manberg's life a living hell go up in flames. He could've stayed, could have let himself fall into that villainous turmoil he'd seen Quackity fall into, but he couldn't.

All it took was the sudden appearance of Tubbo and Ranboo, of even the fucking *Warden* of all people making his return for the big event, and he was tapping out. He couldn't do it. He had expected that it would just be a select few people, the baddest of the bad all congregated together in one building, but it hadn't been, and now the guilt forms a tight knot into his stomach.

He pushes it away. He'd already spent countless nights thinking this shit over, wallowing in his self misery. No more of it. He was a former hero, not a fucking baby. He didn't need to cry, didn't need to look at himself in the mirror and see the etches of self pity reflected back at him.

What he needs to do is *leave*.

To get the fuck out of Manberg, no matter how bad it'd hurt. If he stays, he's dead, or one of his friends are dead; he doubts he could stop himself from marching into the Hero Complex at one point and gutting Dream right there.

It's a wonder he's survived this long from doing it, the constant pull of exhaustion weighing him down (really, he had no clue how he'd ended up so fucking tired all the time) being his

inevitable downfall.

Truthfully, he just had to leave. Maybe start a new life in some other city, or make one of his own. Fuck it; he'd start his *own* god damn town, a place called *L'Manburg* just to spite the shit out of this one.

L'Manburg would be better, he believes, with no walls, with no *hierarchy*. There would just be life as it is, a freedom breathed into grass and trees, of sunlight and shimmering days instead of horrible, harrowing walls. Maybe he could outlaw heroes and villains, even though he'd be the only one living there.

A new life, just him and his one pair of clothes. He could make it. He's made it before on his own and he could certainly do it again. (The thought of abandoning Oswald, of abandoning Wilbur and the rest of the Craft family, of the horrified look on Tubbo and Ranboo's faces when they don't see him again almost forces him to his knees, but he has to ignore it. He will leave, if not for his sake, then for theirs).

With this in mind, Tommy takes a breath, presses his hands to the wall, and opens his eyes to gather his surroundings.

The walls in the flat are bare, the floorboards creak and smell of ash— no, the *whole* place smells of it. He's certain that he'd choke to the stench at some point but he's certain he's growing used to the smell of crackling fire.

For a moment, he could've thought he was back in the Banquet Hall, but he knows that he's not. He had walked much farther than that. Plus, Hall was a place of beauty, of an enthralling scent to lure those unsuspecting in; while it had been burned to the ground, this room is nothing short of the extravagance the Hall held.

The room that Tommy's in is small and quaint. The walls are bare and it reeks (beyond the ash stench) of a place that hasn't been lived in for a long, long time. The windows don't have curtains or blinds and moonlight streams through brighter than it ever has.

Ironic, he figures, for it to be a full moon; it was a full moon on the night that he'd fallen from the tower, too. When he'd somehow dragged himself to a small flat off one of the blocks in Manberg, from how he'd somehow ended up on Quackity's sofa the morning after.

Something clicks, all too suddenly, and Tommy's heart stutters.

In his state of delirium, he'd dragged himself to the only place he could think of off the top of his head where no one would go, where nobody could possibly find him.

With one hand shakily reaching out to press against the wall's chill, the other straggly running against the familiar carpeted flooring, his breathing is close to stopping. He was back to the first place he'd found to be home other than the Hero Complex, and it was covered in debris, just as the Hall was.

The very thought of Quackity potentially torching the place once they'd both left makes him physically sick to his stomach and he turns away, putting his palms to his eyes and letting out a shuddering gasp.

Tommy has to get an idea of his surroundings, to somehow figure out a plan on how he can find a way out of Manberg's decently guarded walls.

Deep down, he has a feeling that he'll never escape, no matter how hard he tries.

The idea of *L'Manberg*, of a place all to himself, sounds far too good to be true. This is where he will die, someday; in this horrid apartment, potentially ending up with an entirely new identity like he'd done before. There was no way over the fucking walls, especially not with people potentially looking—

The thought hits him, and he pauses in his next step. His eyes flit down, looking at the silver bracelet around his wrist. The ruby shines in the moonlight, almost taunting him, as if to say, *It's finally time. You've waited long enough.*

His breath catches in his throat, that strange numb feeling washing over him, bringing a gentle embrace against his back. He hadn't removed it in a long, long time; he couldn't imagine what would happen if he did, really. It was a doubt that he could even do anything with his wings anymore, with them tucked against his back underneath the suppressor for this long.

Dream used to warn him that he shouldn't wear a suppressor for longer than a day, but then again, Dream didn't usually force him to wear them, anyways.

He always liked Tommy's papery wings, looking at the designs on them, even if he did force him to tuck them uncomfortably beneath a cloak most of the time.

*"They will come in handy someday,"* Dream had once said, giving Tommy a rough pat on the shoulder and a sharp smile.

Tommy figures that he was right. His wings, technically, *had* saved his life (and in turn, he'd ruined them forever, even if he didn't want to think of it. He did not acknowledge it, did not process it; they were fine, he *knew* they were).

Carefully, and with shaking fingers, Tommy puts his hand over the bracelet. He grabs it, digs his nails into the wiring, and breathes in. There's only a second of hesitation before he tugs it off, breathing out a sharp exhale and letting the bracelet drop to the floor.

It clatters against the ground, echoing against the empty, cold walls.

For a second, there's silence.

The moment is over quickly, pain blistering against his back and his sides.

The pain is the excruciating kind; the shit that makes his heart leap into his throat, kneeling down onto his knees to press his palms against the floorboards. It's not *that* awful of pain—

he's had worse— but it's still uncomfortable. He'd rather already be on his knees if he had to be sick instead of completely just collapsing.

*Breathe*, he tells himself, brushing his hand through his hair. *Breathe. You're a former hero—you can be stronger than this. You are stronger than this.*

One arm wrapping around himself, eyes squeezing shut against the onslaught of tears threatening to pour down his cheeks as his wings reappear underneath his shirt, he breathes the way that Wilbur had showed him a few nights ago.

*Inhale for six, hold for seven, then exhale for eight.*

It's a mantra, a small thing he can do his best to abide by (and one of the last things minus the emerald sitting uncomfortably atop his hoodie that he will remember Wilbur by).

Tommy's legs are shaky as he gets to his feet, his hands pressing against the wall to stabilize them. He needs to leave now that he's got his wings out again— to pack all of his shit up and fly the fuck out of here.

It was slightly freeing, even though his entire body felt as though it had been lit on fire. The wings against his back, papery and long since left to never allow him flight again, twitch. He removes his hoodie, clawing at it for a moment before digging into his pocket, producing the small pocket knife he'd subconsciously grabbed from his apartment before dipping.

Shakily, he cuts out the holes for wings, feeling his own twitch a little from being exposed to open air after so long. He can feel a heat flash coming on, a wave of nausea pressing against the front of his neck, but he ignores it. He already knew this would be coming, and he suddenly wishes that he had a box of that Dramamine shit Phil had let him borrow once in the car when he'd gotten car sick.

*Breathe*, he tells himself again, pocketing the knife into his jeans once more and slipping the hoodie back over his torso. Gently, he reaches behind himself, slowly pulling his wings from out of the holes.

He doesn't know much about moth wings, or anything at all, despite being a hybrid himself—what he did know was that his own hurt, were decorated with holes that hopefully wouldn't staunch his flying too much, and that he had antennae.

Dream never told him much about moths other than that he, personally, found them stupid. (Tommy pointedly began to hide his antennae after that, tucked underneath one of Sapnap's old beanies).

Quackity knew of his wings, of course; he'd taken care of them, always with a very sorrowful expression, as if he was mourning something. Whenever Tommy asked why, he was always met with a very sad smile and a wave of a hand. Nothing was wrong, and he'd believed it, even with how Quackity's face would fall everytime he thought that Tommy wasn't looking.

It's strange, almost freeing in the worst of ways, and bile starts to rise in his throat at the way his instincts are practically screaming at him. They'd been buried and fuzzy for so long and to be returned out of nowhere, fullforce, is an otherworldly experience that Tommy suddenly wishes he hadn't forced himself into.

He can handle it, though, he figures. His goal is to get out of the city, then deal with whatever the fuck it is he's got going on with his wings later.

Bending down, he pockets his hybrid suppressor, grabbing the only other article of clothing he'd brought with him. He crosses the apartment, perched by the window that filters in moonlight and debates for a moment.

He *could* test his new wings out now; fly out into the night, let himself glide and stretch them out for a second (he'd always seen Quackity doing that back in the day. He'd wanted to join, but the chances of being found by Dream were far too high. Plus, they still needed to 'heal,' according to Quackity. The snow had damaged them far too much that day).

Huffing, he sits on the ledge of the window, tossing one leg over. His wings twitch painfully again, antennae feeling strange against the top of his curls. Hopefully, they'd be hidden underneath his curls— they had been a tad before, but that was back when he had shorter hair, cropped just at the ears like Dream's. Now, they should be covered far more.



He can't do much but hope.

Closing his eyes, Tommy breathes in and breathes out, preparing to swing his other leg over the side and jump. The wind blows a nice breeze— it's cool, brushing against his cheeks like a familiar biting he recognizes far too well.

Tommy's muscles tense, instincts suddenly blazing against his skin in an uproar. It's so out of nowhere that his eyes fly open, eyebrows pulling together, one arm outstretching to glance at his wings. They hadn't moved much, if at all, and a part where one of the small holes is whistles in the wind blowing in through the open window.

He almost has the nerve to ask himself what could be setting off his instincts— external monologue; he was turning into Wilbur by this point, and the thought drove a knife into his chest— when he is silenced by a creaking noise.

Instantly, every part of him is alert. One hand goes to his dagger, the other leg twitching in preparation to jump.

The front door opens, and he half expects it to be Quackity, when a heavy footstep that he knows far too well echoes into his ears.

He hasn't even seen who it is yet, and he still knows. He always did back in the day. The ability to differentiate one's footsteps with another person's was one of his bigger skills back in the Complex.

He'd always thought that it came with his hybridity, that potentially his instincts or even his antennae provided him with a strange insight on who was nearby, but on days where he did wear a suppressor for once, he still had it. The worst of it was Dream's footfalls, though, the heaviness of his boots and the clinging of his Netherite pocket watch decorated in gold.

Tommy knows exactly who it is that comes through the door, moonlight decorating their tall form, but he can't find it in him to move. History repeats and it's the Fall all over again; it's

the Banquet all over again, and he cannot move. He can hardly breathe, doing nothing but staring as Morpheus stares at him from behind that stupid porcelain mask mask.

“Hello, Theseus,” that familiar, icy cold tone says, bursting against his ears. It drips with snow, with threads not yet cut loose.

The air tightens, and for a moment, Tommy thinks he's dreaming again. Maybe if he just goes out the window now, he won't have to face his nightmare. If he closes his eyes, he'll just go right back to sleep and wake up in Phil's guest bedroom, and every single thing about this will have just been another nightmare.

The Bard, departing from his friends, removing his suppressor, *all* of it. A silly little dream that he'd laugh about in the morning over breakfast with his pseudo family.

Then the voice speaks again, floorboards creak under heavy footfalls, and Tommy knows that this isn't fake. There are times where he doesn't know dream from reality, when nightmares feel as real as the very air he breathes outside, walls tasting of metallic and insulation, but this is real.

The air he breathes in, the familiar scent of blood tangled with red roses that reek of death, is all too familiar.

Morpheus gets closer until he's standing right in front of Tommy, one hand grabbing onto his arm and tugging him from the window, fingers bruising against his forearm. Water rushes through Tommy's ears.

There have been days where he had actually dreamt of this moment; of being in front of Morpheus again and all the things he'd do to him. How he'd kill him, let him bleed out, humiliate him and show him for who he really is in front of all of Manberg. Their perfect number one hero, tainted.

All of it falls apart at this moment, and Morpheus tsk's, knocking the dagger from Tommy's hand. It clatters to the floorboards.

"It's so great to see you again, little moth," Dream says calmly. The moonlight shines in from the window, the black painted smile on his face filling Tommy's stomach with something sick as it's illuminated in hues of blue and white. "I've missed you very much."

Tommy says nothing, fear nearly pulling him to the floor. Dream examines him, a mask displaying no emotions. Tommy can see the exact moment that Dream's body language changes. The man's shoulders tense, head tilts, and in that second, Tommy feels as though he may be sick.

A gloved hand reaches forwards, tugging on the necklace wrapped around Tommy's neck. It was the one Wilbur had given him so that he'd match with the rest of the family. The emerald gleams in the moonlight.

"Is this from them?" Dream questions, and there's nothing bitter about his tone. It's solid, like a block of ice, and somehow it feels far worse.

With a small hum, as if it were so simple, Dream pulls the necklace sharply from Tommy's neck, the chain snapping. With it, Tommy can feel the stinging appearing in the corner of his eyes.

"I don't think you'll be needing that anymore. You won't be seeing them again anytime soon, if ever again," Dream muses lightly, kicking the necklace with the tip of his boot, before adding with a crane to his neck, "I mean, they *did* betray you, after all."

Tommy's head snaps up, eyes wide. Betrayed? They hadn't known anything about him, nothing about how he was a former hero, of who he had been, even. All they knew was that he was some random civilian that occasionally stayed over at their house... right?

"Oh, I know," Dream sympathises, letting the necklace clatter to the floor beside the dagger. Tommy's nails dig into his palm, doing his best not to cry. He will not cry; he's stronger than that. He's a big man, even if he may be a tad too scared to face Dream despite the amount of times he'd sworn he would. "It's awful to realize you've been betrayed, isn't it? That's how I felt, too, but... well, it's a consequence you have to bear. Think of it as your karma."

(A single petal falls from Tommy's wrist to the floor, crumpled and dark).

Slowly, Dream leans closer, and Tommy's certain the world stops when he whispers into his ear, "Destiny has served you a cold dish, Theseus. It is what you deserve."

## Chapter End Notes

hi everyone!! super cool 2 see u!! sorry for disappearing, writers block has got me by the neck rn, so further apologies if this fic's updates are super scattered! we are nearing the end though, so that's fun.

before we CONTINUE, i have a few things to talk about!!

1) holy shit we have got FANART??? holllyyy shit. my friend andrew made me fanart of butterflies!tommy and i lost my SHITTT, go like their post & follow them on twitter rn!! [annie's beautiful fanart :D!](#)

2) okay, a little more serious topic: THE TAGS HAVE CHANGED!! please, please, please check the tags before continuing with this fic. this is your introspection! i will make sure to tag it when it happens as well in the beginning notes, but here is your warning ahead of time to check them! <3

3) i want to reiterate again that i write this fic completely for fun n stuff:D i may have a plot planned out and an idea of where this is going, but i don't want anyone to think that i've got this shit completely figured out, because i do not :.) i am writing this silly little fic just for fun, and i want to apologize here & now if there's weird ass plot holes or anything. i see you, i hear you, but i also want to make it clear that i'll *definitely* forget shit i might've said in the beginning AHAKSHKD. apologies again if the plot holes or anything bother you! <3 i'll do my best to avoid them :) /all gen /all lh (this isn't directly calling anyone out btw, i just wanted to make a psa)

on another note, FKEHSKSHDKDKDHKSJD DID YOU SEE 4/4 LORE IM FUCKING COLLAPSING BRO OHMYGOFODD ILL NEVER SHUT UP ABOUT THIS okay. i'm sane! i'm normal. !! uhm. i am off to writers block for another month<3 bye bye kings! holy shit /pos

# the other side of paradise

## Chapter Summary

Ranboo clears their throat, eyes sweeping from Wilbur's frozen face to Sam's towering figure.

"We aren't exactly, uh, threatening yet," they say, and Wilbur raises an eyebrow on the emphasis of yet. "We just— look. Tommy's missing, today's his birthday and we can't find him. Considering that you're, well, *you*, we figured you may know something or another."

If he wasn't already hurt enough, Wilbur feels as though a blade has pressed itself into his midsection, right between his ribs.

(Nothing's there, but he can still feel it's sting).

Before anyone else can say a word, Wilbur whispers out, "What do you mean, Tommy's missing?"

or, yeah<3 haha anyways

## Chapter Notes

**tw:** implied MCD, severe anxiety attack, unreliable narrator (it's severe in this one fellas), manipulation & gaslighting, and just. tommy being very afraid ! okay. let me know if i've missed anything<3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The moment Niki walks into Nook's, she knows that something's wrong.

For one thing, the bakery's completely empty (minus two teenagers, a man she's never seen before, Jack, and Sam).

It was a pretty rare thing for the place to be so desolate, especially during the rush hours of the afternoon.

To make matters stranger, the air itself feels thick, as if someone had just passed away or something minutes beforehand.

Eyebrows pulled together, she removes the scarf from around her neck and stuffs it into her shawl pocket, quickly taking her place by Jack. Her friend doesn't meet her eyes, his own untrained and concentrated, clearly thinking something over. It fills her stomach with unease.

Sam, breaking the moment of complete silence, begins to walk his way across the bakery, reaching for his jacket hung up on the coathanger near the front entrance.

"Wait— wait— Sam, what's going on?" Niki questions, reaching to grab Sam's arm to stop him. The man's in a bit of a frenzy, hair tousled from running his hands through it, eyes suddenly bloodshot. It wasn't a way that Niki saw him frequently.

The last time he'd looked like this, it was because Fran had gone missing. (It was not a fun day and she could remember the way Tommy had printed out numerous missing posters for them to plaster around the city, only for her to come bounding in the door two hours later).

Behind Sam, Jack's got his jaw set in a way that tells her that he's upset. It's the type of look she always sees on his face before they go on patrol. Something's not right.

She turns her head back to Sam, shaking his arm again a little. This time, her voice is far more stern.

"Sam," she repeats, hoping to drag him out of whatever hell he's pulled himself into, "What is going on? Is everyone okay?"

Sam pulls his arm from hers, but not unkindly. She understands that he's clearly upset; she just hopes that she won't have to call Tommy to bring back those missing posters for Fran.

Then, it hits her, and she frowns, glancing around the bakery. Normally, the kid was here around this time. He got off of his shift at that bookstore Wil's father works at around this time and arrives nearing the twenty minute mark, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Slowly, the realization builds up, and she turns to Sam, hoping that her theory is incorrect.

"Is it Tommy?" She questions, voice low. "Is he...?"

The man doesn't say anything, then nods.

Her heart drops a tad. She and Tommy... she wouldn't exactly call them both the best of friends, but she did care for the kid. Anyone in her position would, because he really was just that; a child.

It wasn't difficult to see how he played it off as though he were an eighteen year old. She'd been in his position once before. It ruined her to see yet another kid going through the same thing that she did.

Plus, Wilbur told her about him every now and then. Really, he didn't shut up about the kid, always going on and on about how much he cared for him, how much he saw him as a little brother. It was sweet in its own way. He's listened to her talk enough times about her own brother, anyways.

"Is he okay?" She whispers hurriedly, her fingernails digging into Sam's shirt sleeve. His expression shifts, not to one of pain, but of sorrow, and her stomach twists into knots.

A throat clears behind her and she whips her head around, half expecting for it to be Jack who speaks up, but it's the guy she doesn't recognize.

"Do you know Wilbur Craft?" He asks, tilting his head and looking at her. The way that he looks at her, as if he knows exactly who she is and what she's done— it puts her off, but she holds her ground.

Shifting uncomfortably on her feet and casting a look at Jack, who won't meet her eyes, she nods.

"He's a regular here," she states, letting go of Sam's arm to fidget with the hem of her shirt. She hums a moment, then adds, "And he's one of my good friends. Jack's, too."

Jack shoots her a glare, and she suppresses the urge to flinch.

"We think that he's done something to Tommy," he interjects the new guy, who glances in his direction curiously, but doesn't defend himself. Niki blinks, then frowns. To Tommy? She'd heard the guy talk about Tommy frequently, always in an excited manner (it was almost like hearing a child talk about the new best friend they'd made on the playground or something, but she didn't mind listening).

"What are you implying?" She questions, barely hiding the suspicious horror in her voice. A part of her hopes that the way Jack's jaw is set and the tension in the room doesn't have something to do with where this conversation is going.

Wilbur had spoken about Tommy as if he was his brother, a part of his family. If she knew one thing about that family, it was mutual protection.

It was rare that any of them got hurt because they all protected one another and made sure the others were safe.

To think that Wilbur, or one of the other members, could've possibly hurt someone that they now thought of as a little brother— and a son, from the look on Phil's face— was almost hard to believe.



It didn't mean, though, that it was entirely impossible. She knew what they were like, knew of their secret identities that she and Jack had sworn to keep hidden underground. They weren't bad people, just slightly... *government opposed*. (She didn't like the government that much, either, so she couldn't exactly say shit.)

"You don't think...?" She begins, her voice a horrified whisper as her thoughts make war with one another. They wouldn't, would they? Did she really know them well enough to make that sort of assumption?

Out of the corner of her eye, Sam leaves the bakery, and on his heels comes Tubbo and Ranboo. The former gives her a steely look and, while normally she'd be worried that he didn't like her, she understands. If Jack went missing out of the blue, she'd do everything she could to find her best friend. Damn anyone who got in her way.

"That's exactly what we think," Jack confirms, coming out from behind the counter and walking up to her. He reaches over her shoulder, pulling his heavy aviator jacket from the coathanger. "Sam's going over to their house right now to check things out. He told us to retrace our steps and check places he could possibly be while they're there."

Niki purses her lips a tad.

While it was a far greater idea that they should split up to get a better footing of where the kid could be, she didn't much like the idea of not being there to inspect Wilbur's house. If he did in fact hurt Tommy, she'd see to it that he and the rest of his family burned to hell and back.

"Let's go check the other spots, then," she grumbles, pulling her sweater tighter around herself. She flashes Jack a look, then, lifting her wrist just barely to flair her matching cat charm bracelet in the afternoon sunlight, "But, if Sam gets a confirmation, you are not stopping what I do."

Knowingly, the corner of Jack's mouth twitches.

"I wouldn't stop you, and you know that," he murmurs, waving his wrist just barely to hear the jingling of his own charm bracelet beneath the jacket sleeve, "I'd encourage it."

---

Tommy isn't sure how many times in his life he feels true, unbridled fear, but this has to be one of them.

He was certain he'd gotten over this whole 'being afraid' thing; he was a big man, a strong one, but he can't seem to find the bravery he'd had the night before the Banquet. He can't find the bravery he'd had to sneak up and watch villains in his stupidest of nights (the very thing that had nearly gotten him killed, he recalls, with a swift kick to himself mentally).

There is no fear, none greater, than the manifestation of itself. The very thing that walks with Tommy, its hands digging into his shoulders, nails piercing into the blades, is what Tommy believes himself to be afraid of. It was never the fall, never the cold; it was him. It was *always* him.

"Keep moving," Dream hisses above him, and he lowers his head, trying to coax his legs to move quicker. He can't see anything, can hardly feel anything (did the fucker really have to choose another day where it was freezing ass cold to take him again?). "Did anyone ever tell you that you were slow, Theseus?"

*It was always Lycomedes.*

Just barely, he can feel the barrel of a gun shoved into his back to force him to walk faster, and he complies. He's not typically afraid of death, not as much as he was when he was a kid, still a trainee in the program underneath Dream's wing.

Now, he'd met his end face-to-face; had come close enough with death that he could practically call the two intertwined if he tried. He'd dipped his fingers into the surface of murky water, and somehow had escaped then. If he didn't die that day, then he could survive this one, too.

After what feels like forever of walking, the air changes— the biting cold is quickly replaced with a gust of warm air, and he can smell something familiar. It's sanitized here, and there's just the hints of cinnamon coffee coming from a distance away, but it's not close enough to be overwhelming.

It takes a second before it hits him and he immediately stops, eyes wide underneath the blindfold, struggling against the ropes that have his wrists held behind his back.

"No," he whispers, shaking his head violently, fighting against the seething of Dream's teeth and the biting of steel being driven into his spine, "No, no- you can't- you can't just bring me back here, you—"

"Shut up," Dream hisses, a sharp order, and he bites his tongue. One of his hands digs into his shoulder blade, nails piercing the skin even from over the fabric of his sweater.

Just barely, he can feel Dream lean down beside him, the cold porcelain of his former pseudo brother's mask cold even from inches away.

"You're going to wake everyone up, idiot, and then I'll have to explain I captured some criminal off the streets. Maybe frame you for murder, and then I'll have to execute you publicly. I don't think you'd want that, do you, Theseus? No— you're not going out like that. You deserve a hero's death. Unsatisfying, *harmful*. I'm not going to have the very thing I created snuffed out by my own hand in such a useless way like that."

Tommy lowers his head, trying to slow his breathing. A hero's death; was that really what Theseus had received when he was pushed from a cliff's edge?

Not all heroes he read about got happy endings. In truth, none of them had. The thought, the reality, fills his chest with something bitter and thick. There would be no happy ending for him here, as he'd always thought— the fairytales, the books projected onto screens, were just that.

Fairytales.

*You are no hero*, a voice reminds him in the back of his head, but he pushes it away when Dream speaks again, the man standing up straight again and steering him in a particular direction.

"Keep walking."

Tommy has no choice but to listen.

The familiar sound of a heavyset door being pulled open, bright lights shining against the fabric of his blindfold coming to a sharp close, is enough for him to bite his tongue hard enough to taste metallic.

*Don't give in now*, he tells himself, allowing himself to be led into the despair of his destiny, *Not yet. Not until he's dead.*

—

The house feels incredibly cold when they arrive.

Phil's the first one inside, already peeling his mask off and tossing his hat aside, uncaring of where it lands. Fluidly, he makes his way towards the stairwell, only to pause once he gets a glance into the living room.

Behind him, Techno places his skull mask on the table sat beside the front door, pink hair sticking to his forehead with sweat. His red eyes, still unhidden by his suppressor— because really, there was no time for that, even now— watch Phil's face fall, his father swiftly making his way into the living room and disappearing from view.

He can hear the sounds of broken sobs, undoubtedly from his twin (and his chest twists at it, concern bubbling in his throat), and Phil's whispering reassurances.

Techno doesn't take even another second to remove the heavier parts of his armour before he's entering the living room, fingers anxiously tapping against one another at the sight of his father and his twin brother.

Phil has his hands pressed to Wilbur's face, cradling it with care. The man looks broken apart in a way that he had not in a long, long time— his hair is ruffled, eyes puffy and cheeks red with salt.

The sobs have stopped by now, and Techno takes a seat on the sofa on the other side of Wilbur, eyebrows pulled together. He didn't know exactly what had happened, just that Tommy— their Tommy— was a witness.

More importantly, *the* witness.

The very one that his brother had come home grumpy about, the one that he'd been tugging at his hair and losing his mind over for a while now. It was the very witness that he only seemed to forget about when Tommy himself came by, when Phil would make him his favourite dinner, when Techno would pick up his dusty violin once more; it was funny how things worked like that.

*Dramatic irony*, he believed, was the phrase for it.

"Wil," Phil murmurs softly, and Wilbur gives a shaky smile at his father, then over the man's shoulder at Techno.

Carefully, the former returns it.

"Hey, dad," he responds, clearly far too exhausted to cry any further.

Another thing that hits Techno about this— Wilbur wasn't exactly a crier.

He used to be, when he was much, much younger, but now, it was a rare thing for him to cry. The first time Techno (or Phil, for that matter) had seen him nearly on the verge of tears was when Tommy had called him his brother, and when Techno himself had accidentally kicked him too hard underneath the breakfast table.

Now, he looks as though he's been beaten; emotionally and physically.

"Oh, Wil," Phil continues to speak, eyebrows furrowed as he takes his son's hand in his own, "I'm so sorry."

Wilbur just nods, his head ending in the slightest of shakes, "Nothing you can do about it. Just— just how things are, yeah?"

"I should've stayed behind," Phil murmurs suddenly, "I shouldn't have let you go out that time. I knew better. You needed rest, to recuperate a bit more, you didn't need to go on patrol. If I had just stopped you, none of this would have happened."

Deep down, Techno's unsure if that's true. This was going to happen someday in the future if not today. There would come a day when Wilbur figured out that Tommy was his witness, that the same child that the three of them had grown to call a part of their family was now in deep shit with their villain codes.

In truth, Techno could see a possible brightside.

Tommy had saved his life; he'd pulled him from off the streets, treated his bullet wound, and only asked for swordfighting lessons in return. This could be considered repayment, but tenfold.

"What if he'd been there that day?" Wilbur's suddenly whispering, and Techno raises his head to look at his brother. There's no emotion behind brown eyes, and suddenly worry begins to push a spear into Techno's side.

"What day?" Phil's frowning now, Techno can see it.

There's a light pause, Wilbur allowing the internal hurricane of thoughts to slowly calm, before he raises his head.

"The Banquet," he says, traces of horror in his tone, but something to it tells Techno that he'd been thinking this over for a while. Not exactly the idea of Tommy being at the Banquet, but of his supposed witness attending. Techno remembers it being passed around in conversation, but not thinking too much about it—he didn't really care much for a bystander. He wanted the host, the demon with blood-red eyes and a hidden tongue of steel.

At first thought, it felt like a reach.

How much of a coincidence did it have to be for Wilbur's witness to have attended the Banquet, when all they knew about him— at the time— was that he was simply that; a witness to one of their crimes. He wasn't guilty of anything more, and they had no clue if he was even a vigilante of some type, no matter how thoroughly Wilbur had convinced himself that with the person's skill levels, they had to be something.

Now, though, as he thought about it more... it made sense.

Something bitter fills his mouth as a slow realization sinks in.

Tommy was the witness. Techno had trained with Tommy, sword fighting on a rooftop, and the kid had proven to have something that most people who'd never crossed swords before normally did not have.

"He's trained," Techno had told Wilbur through his teeth, feeling the pricking of rage against his neck.

His words are familiar, and he has to bite his tongue at the *deja vu*.

*“A lot more than I expected,” Techno had admitted, approval clear in his tone. “He almost seems... trained.”*

*Wilbur had tensed a little at this, his hand poised over the next word he'd been writing, eyeing his brother out the corner of his eye.*

*“What are you trying to imply, Technoblade?” Wilbur had asked, a frown on his face.*

Techno's tongue burns at the words he could remember himself speaking, the way his veins had turned to ice just by saying them out loud.

*“You know exactly what I'm implying, Wil.”*

"You..." Phil begins, and Techno can hear the beginnings of realization in his tone as well. Collectively, they're understanding.

Tommy had far bigger secrets than they'd first anticipated.

*Traitor* is Techno's first thought, but he quickly dismisses it. The thought of Tommy betraying him made little to no sense; the kid had displayed distaste towards all hierarchies of the hero and villain system. He wanted nothing to do with them (despite helping Techno, a literal villain), and seemed to be the type to scurry away from any opportunity that brought them forth.

So why had he spied on Wilbur's fight? Why had he helped a half-dead villain? There were too many questions, and too little answers (not to account for the facts that Tommy was both fifteen and living by himself, too, a feat he'd discovered after the kid had left only two days ago. It feels longer).



A pounding at the front door breaks all three of them out of their moment, and Techno cranes his head in its direction.

"I'll get it," he reassures his father and twin, both of which are now frowning, eyebrows pulled together. It's in these moments, Techno believes, that the two look the most alike. Normally, what with Wilbur's brown hair, it's hard to tell the two are father and son; but now, it's obvious.

Fluidly, Techno gets off of the sofa, walking into the front foyer and peeking through the peephole. Standing on the other side of the door is unexpected company— Tubbo and Ranboo, looking more pissed off than he'd seen them in a long time, some random guy with square glasses, and... was that Sam?

Frowning, he backs up a couple paces so that he can meet Phil's eyes. They share a look before Phil's standing up and pulling Wilbur with him.

"I know that you're upset," he begins quietly, gripping Wilbur's forearm- an anchor. "But you're gonna need to answer the door. Techno and I are still in our costumes. Can you do that, Wil?"

Wilbur exhales, breathing out and giving his father a slightly scathing look, "I'm fine, Phil. I can still do normal things, just..." he trails off, turning away. "I'll be fine. Go get changed, both of you. I'll see what they want."

With a quick glance between the two, Techno and Phil cave.

"Keep your guard up," Techno warns, and Wilbur just huffs.

"I'm not stupid, Techno," he hisses, giving him a sharp glare. "I know what I'm doing. Just because I'm... upset doesn't mean that I can't still do my work. Fuck."

A silence, and then Techno nods his head slightly, hand gripping the railing of the stairwell.

"We'll be down soon," Phil says from in front of him, giving Wilbur a kind but strained smile.

Wilbur waves them off, exhaling, "Go. I'll take care of this."

—

The sound of retreating footsteps up the stairwell, each one heavy and creaking against the wood, and he turns towards the door. There's another pounding knock, this one much more aggressive and forceful than the last, and he winces.

With numb fingers, Wilbur pries the door open, flinching a tad at the looks on everyone's faces.

He's seen Tubbo like this before—the look of something grave on his face, shoulders tense and ready to slaughter as many people as he needs to. It was never, though, directed at him (except for once when they'd first met, but Ranboo... Ranboo's expression never matched Tubbo's, at least not to this severity).

"Sam, Ranboo, Tubbo," Wilbur greets, eyes flicking to the stranger with glasses whose name he doesn't know, before returning to meet Sam's eyes. If anyone's the angriest, it's the man he's come to know through visiting Tommy; the one that had memorized his father's coffee orders, who knew them like they were old college friends.

Shifting with unease at the silence that follows, he clears his throat and speaks again.

"How can I help you, fellas? Look, this really isn't a good time, and—"

Ranboo recoils slightly at his words, and something bitter fills his mouth that he can't quite name. Beside him, Tubbo steps forwards, an expression of pure anger on his face twisting into a gruesome look.

Wilbur barely gets the time to react before his shirt's being pulled forwards and he's met face-to-face with Tubbo, who is seething.

"Where the fuck is Tommy?" He hisses, and a stone drops in Wilbur's stomach.

*Do they know?* He thinks, wide-eyed glances between Ranboo and Sam, who are stony with their gazes.

Even the stranger's expression hasn't changed, who remains completely at a standstill, almost at *ease*, in a way. He doesn't have time to think of how strange that is in itself.

"What do you mean?" He whispers, but his tone is lilted. Tubbo sees right through it, shoving him backwards with a sharp hiss.

"You have him!" Tubbo shouts, pointing a finger at him accusingly. Behind the kid, Ranboo grabs onto his shoulders, but doesn't make any move to genuinely hold him back. "You have him! You took him, I know you did! You figured out what— no, you figured out *who* he is, and now you're—"

"Tubbo," Sam interrupts, hand raised. It's the first time he's spoken, and his tone is calm; it's the way Wilbur recalls an ocean just before a thunderstorm. Careful, waves breaking gently against rocks, whitecaps appearing in the distance.

His breathing quickens, watching as Tubbo quiets almost instantly, lips pressed together. He's fucked.

Then, something clicks, and his eyes move right to Sam's.

*"Figured out who he is?"* He repeats, voice shrill, hand reaching up to carve through his fringe. "What the fuck are you talking about? He's Tommy, right? What do you mean? Who

else could he be?"

Sam's eyes narrow dangerously, but they scan Wilbur's face, clearly looking for something.

"I'm going to ask you this once," he says, holding up a calloused finger. "Where is Tommy?"

"I don't know," Wilbur responds, and it's truthful. He didn't want to know where Tommy was, quite frankly. A part of him was afraid to ever see the kid again, despite wishing that he could.

His little brother, ties undone by his own hand, by the gun clattering against the alleyway floor... it was too much to bear, and his stomach twisted into knots at the thought. If he saw him again, he wasn't sure how he'd react. (Especially with the new thoughts that boiled with the old, the idea that Tommy could be something or someone they hadn't originally thought of— a cog in the wheel).

(Wilbur isn't sure how much he cares, though. Tommy was his *brother*, just as much as Techno was. Brothers didn't keep secrets, but they also didn't pry, either. The idea of that, though, had been driven into the ground almost immediately after him and the other members of his family had pretty much snooped into his personal life with the whole *holy shit you're fifteen? and you don't have parents?* thing. He isn't sure if he could forgive himself for that, just as much as he couldn't forgive himself for the previous night).

Just to solidify his thoughts, he whispers out, "I don't know where he is. I don't *want* to know."

Silence falls again, and then it's the stranger who speaks.

"He's telling the truth," they say, and Wilbur nearly gets whiplash from how quickly he turns his head in the person's direction. They're staring right at him, as if looking directly into his soul. "There's still something he's hiding, I think, but he doesn't know who or where Tommy is."

Sam hisses through his teeth, looking dangerously close to snapping Wilbur's neck (and really, the man isn't sure if he'd fight back or not), "How do you know?"

The person shrugs, "I just know."

"Real helpful," Ranboo remarks sarcastically, and the stranger beams, as if they were given an actual compliment.

"Thanks, Ranboo!" They chirp.

The look of pure excitement on their face makes Wilbur's head hurt, so he looks away, focusing on a stray pebble that had found its way onto their front patio.

Sam had asked if they knew *who* Tommy was— it was almost coincidental that he'd brought this topic up when they'd only just been talking about how likely it was that the kid had attended the Banquet. That someone they'd all grown to see as family, someone they had— *Wilbur* had— given an emerald necklace to.

Wilbur taps anxiously against his thigh, looking back up at Sam. Like clockwork, he prays to every God and star he doesn't believe in, *Please, don't let it be true*. "What did you mean, *who he is*? What the fuck does that mean, Sam? Who is he?"

The man's jaw clenches, and his eyes maneuver over Wilbur's shoulder. The sounds of footsteps coming down the stairs break the tension, causing Sam to exhale greatly. His shoulders, albeit not much, relax.

"Let us inside and we will tell you," he grumbles, shifting uncomfortably.

"No," Phil calls, taking the spot beside Wilbur. His expression's firm, even from the corner of Wilbur's eye, mouth set dangerously. "Stop harassing my son and leave."

Sam's eyes flash and he walks a pace forwards. It's almost funny; he's two inches taller than Phil, and yet the two hold the same level of intimidation over the other.

"Philza Craft," he spits, as if the words are venomous. To his right, Wilbur can feel Techno tense a little. "I know all there is to know about you, about your family. You're a *businessman*, a good one at that— how many times have people died underneath the thing you call business? Don't let it be more than you could hope for."

"What do you want, Sam?" Phil interjects, not bothering to think of that last comment. A piece of Wilbur, something buried and deep, forces him to shift with a strange sense of discomfort.

He knew his father— what he did was for the better. He didn't intentionally hurt people that didn't deserve it. (Did that make it right, though? It was something he didn't understand; something that kept him awake at night, but he shoved it away).

"Tommy," Sam says the boy's name with a great weight, the same way Phil has before, the way Wilbur has before. "Where is he?"

"I think that we've told you enough times already that we don't know," Phil reiterates, white knuckles against the doorframe, eyes boring into the man's. "If we did, we'd tell you. But we don't."

Beside Sam, the stranger begins rocking back and forth from his heels to his toes. It's such a familiar sight, such a Tommy thing to do, that Wilbur swallows a metallic taste in his mouth and forces himself to look away.

"Why are you suddenly so interested to know where he is?" Techno questions, monotone breaking through the glass barrier. "He's just your employee. Do you care that much—?"

"I care far more about my employees than you'd think," Sam intervenes, tone made of steel. "You do realize you're not helping your case at all, right? I could very well get authority involved. I know all there is to know about your family, I could tear it apart from the seams if I wished."

Ranboo clears their throat, eyes sweeping from Wilbur's frozen face to Sam's towering figure.

"We aren't exactly, uh, threatening yet," they say, and Wilbur raises an eyebrow on the emphasis of yet. "We just— look. Tommy's missing, today's his birthday and we can't find him. Considering that you're, well, *you*, we figured you may know something or another."

If he wasn't already hurt enough, Wilbur feels as though a blade has pressed itself into his midsection, right between his ribs.

(Nothing's there, but he can still feel it's sting).

Before anyone else can say a word, Wilbur whispers out, "What do you mean, Tommy's missing?"

—

The basement doesn't smell anything like what Tommy remembers.

Rather than the constant fumes of bleach following him every step he goes, the white clean walls shining back at him with annoying fluorescent lights, he gets only pitch black. Underneath it, something he can't name.

Chemicals, but none of it has the distinct stench of bleach. They're a mixture of something that makes his skin crawl.

*Karl would know, he thinks with a twinge of emotions he doesn't understand. If he was here, he and Tubbo would have a war trying to name every element of chemicals in the air. They'd even bring out the periodic table.*

“Home sweet home, right?” Dream’s voice cuts through his thoughts, echoing against the walls. Tommy shudders, wishing so greatly that he could wrap his arms tightly around his torso in hopes to ward off the feelings of fear. It wouldn't do much, but it'd be something better than this. “I'm sure you missed it here, at the Complex. The big city isn't worth shit when you have a soft bed and a famous title to wake up to in the morning, is it?”

*You killed that famous title*, Tommy wants to remind him through his teeth, nails digging scars into his palms from where they're tied. *You helped me create that title, then tore it out, root and stem.*

There’s nothing left of Theseus, and soon, Tommy figures that there won’t be anything left of him, either.

“What the fuck do you want with me?” he whispers, forcing himself to face Dream in the dark.

A part of him knows this is a bad idea— that speaking with this hero, this villain to nobody’s knowledge but his own, could get him killed. He just hopes that it’s fast.

“*You’re* the one who pushed me off the fucking Tower, Dream. You’re the one who sentenced me to death, and now you’ve *found* me again? For fucking *what?*” Tommy continues to spit, swiveling his head around this way and that, hoping that somehow, he’s seen. That somehow, his message is heard, and the way his teeth grit doesn’t go unnoticed.

For a second, there is silence, and then Dream snorts. It’s a hollow sound, bordering on the line of a dark amusement that makes Tommy’s stomach twist.

“Isn’t it obvious?” the man questions. There’s the sound of movement, of clothing rustling, and then there’s a familiar sound. It’s the kind that Tommy could never forget, the type that has haunted him for more than twenty-four hours by this point.

A gun clicks, a bullet enters the barrel, and Tommy’s throat clogs as cool metal is pressed to his forehead.



“I want to eradicate you, once and for all.”

Immediately, Tommy's stomach plummets, and he lets out a shuddering gasp. He wouldn't plead, he'd told himself. He wouldn't beg for his life, the one that he wanted so desperately to escape from, but that didn't mean he wouldn't communicate.

"You said you wouldn't execute me," he whispers, voice wavering. "You said—"

There's the seering of metal as it's pressed, indenting into the mark that's already in his forehead. This scenario is familiar, he realizes, with the bitter tastes of déjà vu ever-present on his tongue.

Unlike last time, though, the world doesn't seem to slow; honey drips into a pot with an exceeding speed, and Tommy barely gets out another breath before his former mentor speaks again.

"I lied," Dream responds, and the trigger is pulled.

Tommy's last thought is how great of friends Dream and The Bard would really be.

## Chapter End Notes

hahaha ... uh, yeah. everyone is going through it just a bit!

not gonna lie to u, i wrote this chap in like. an hour flat. slash srs! apologies if it isn't the best<3

beta'd by [crowley](#) my absolute beloved and big sibling, i love u. ur amazing. :) everyone go support aem and send ur love to aem RIGHT NOW !!!11111111!

this fic as a whole is dedicated to [crowley](#), [cinder](#), [kai](#), & [foxie](#) because they're just. amazing. and so supportive. i am ill<33 ily guys :D

(psst: check the date)

# niki's guide on how to Not kill a fool

## Chapter Summary

"Do you know why you're here, Tommy?" He asks, and Tommy recoils immediately.

"Don't fucking call me that," he hisses out, voice gravelly with misuse. "Don't call me that. *Ever.*"

Dream hums, tilting his head to the right. He doesn't look offended, but curious.

"You're giving me real whiplash here," he spits. Even though his face is concealed behind a mask, Tommy can't help but feel he's staring right at him. "What the fuck is it, then? *Theseus* or *Tommy*?"

or, everyone is slowly handing together for a search mission & tommy is still going through it ! we love 2 see it /j

## Chapter Notes

HEAVY tws for this chapter!! please stay safe<3

**tws:** implied drug usage (motion sickness pills & headache medication), nausea, very mild emetophobia, HEAVY gaslighting & emotional manipulation, starvation, violence & descriptions of gore/violence, weaponry, unreliable narrator (its bad fellas), & panic attacks. overall; dream is fucking Evil!!

*please* be careful as we move on with the upcoming chapters, they only get heavier<3 and please let me know if i've forgotten any trigger warnings!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

---

The gun clicks, but nothing comes. When Tommy draws in a breath, he can feel the air press into his lungs. It's a sharp sort of realization, the feeling of metal no longer being pressed to the center of his forehead, the buckling of his knees. For a moment, there's nothing, and then there's a deafening sound.

Dream's laughing, loud and booming, just to his left. It's sharp, ending in breathy gasps, the kind that's always tied a knot just at the center of Tommy's stomach.

With it, Tommy breathes in sharply, feeling the knives go down his esophagus and dig into his chest. His knees press into the floor, feeling the cold of the basement seep into the fabric of his pants, ears flooding with the sound of Dream's voice.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the man apologizes, shoes clicking against the floor as he walks closer, pulling the blindfold from Tommy's face. He blinks wildly against the fluorescents, squinting a little at the light and recoiling in on himself; above him, Dream casts a dark shadow, the wicked and painted smile sickly in the colouring. "I was just fucking with you, Theseus. For old time's sake, remember? I used to make fun of you all the time. Remember when we— *ha* — remember when George got mad at us because we replaced his shampoo with blue hair dye?"

Tommy sucks in a breath through his teeth, shuddering and sharp, lowering his head. He counts inwards till five, closes his eyes, then breathes out. He doesn't remember anything of the sort; Dream was the opposite of that. He never wanted to have fun, never wanted to let Tommy just be a *kid*.

It was always work, it was always *keep a level head, present to the public—wash, rinse, repeat*.

He had pulled a prank on George before, but it was *Sapnap* that had helped him. It wasn't Dream who had lifted him onto his shoulders to help him place the water balloons strategically above George's bedroom door. It was *never* Dream.

"You're a fucking *freak*," he hisses, meeting Dream's blackened eyes again, feeling his wings twitch behind him. "You're a literal freak. We never— you never pulled pranks with me, you've never let me be a fucking kid, that wasn't *you*. You're the one who fucking discouraged it! You— you're such a fucking *asshole*. Besides the clear obvious, and I mean this literally, what the fuck's *wrong* with you?"

"We did, though. And nothing's wrong with me, nothing at all," Dream muses, holstering the gun into his side. Despite knowing it's not actually loaded, Tommy still shifts uncomfortably at the sight, something sick swirling in his stomach. He almost feels like he's going to be sick, but he doesn't want to give Dream a reason to be even more pissed off at him. "Maybe you just don't remember, Tommy, but we joked all the time back then! That's what friends do, don't you know?"

The taste of blood, metallic and of sanguine salt, burns at the tip of Tommy's tongue. The feeling of being weightless, of dropping through the sky and feeling the air tear at his skin, makes him sneer.

"We were friends," he bites out, shuffling a bit in where he sits, "We *were* friends. You threw all that out the fucking window the day you chucked me from the top of the Tower. Or don't you remember? You're not going to get anywhere gaslighting me, prick. I'm not an idiot, and I'm certainly not stupid enough to believe that we are anything above enemies, and certainly not *friends*."

Dream sighs, disappointed.

"There is no 'were,' Tommy," he says, brushing a hand through Tommy's hair. "We are friends. We are *family*, even."

Before Tommy can even respond to this, Dream's fingers— gloved and harsh— tug at the back of the boy's curls. With it, he pulls, and Tommy lets out a shriek as he's pulled on his stomach through the basement, kicking out wildly to try and get it to stop. His scalp feels as though it's on fire, his shoulders burning with the scrapes that's been left on them.

"Let go, you fucking piece of shit!" Tommy cries out, trying to toss his head from the man's grip. He won't cry— he won't sob, he won't make himself look weak in the eyes of the beholder. Dream doesn't deserve the time of day, but...

He turns, fingernails breaking into the crown of his head as he does, eyes landing on a cell in the corner of the room. Bile reappears like an old friend in his throat and he lets out a choked sound.

"No, no- no, no," he shakes his head wildly, "No, Dream, don't—"

"Don't worry, Tommy," Dream interrupts, Tommy's words dying in his mouth at the use of his name. His real name. No longer Theseus, but *himself*. Somehow, coming from Dream, that's far fucking worse.

Without much another thought, Tommy is tossed into the open cell, the door to it slamming shut with a shudder behind him. He turns his head, cranes his neck even though it hurts, his hair sharp like knives when it falls back into his eyes.

"Dream—" he begins hoarsely, and the man tilts his head.

"It'll be over soon," is all that Dream says, hands in his pockets. Calm, despite everything. "You'll see, Tommy."

---

Phil cards a hand through his hair, pacing lengthways in his living room. Sitting around him are people he hadn't originally expected to be in his house literally ever; across from him, on the sofa, sits a slightly uncomfortable Sam. Next to him is the stranger (who had introduced himself as 'Charlie Slimecicle, he/him,' with over enthusiasm), and then Ranboo with Tubbo, who keep casting Phil awful glares.

He doesn't blame them, not really, anyways. If he was in their position, he'd probably do worse than they had. Introducing his presence at the potential suspect for his son's disappearance's house? There wasn't a chance— no possible reasoning for civil conversation.

In the kitchen, he hears a smashing noise, a shout, and then the back door slams closed. In front of him, Tubbo and Ranboo collectively flinch, turning in the direction of the noise with mouths twisted into frowns.

Phil just exhales, rubbing the space between his eyes. He turns his head as Techno, hair frazzled a little, walks into the living room.

"I'm guessing Wil left?" He surmises, raising his eyebrows tiredly. Techno just grunts, crossing the room and taking a seat fluidly as far away from everyone else as physically possible.

Sam taps his finger against the armrest of the sofa, expression a swirling storm.

"Why did he leave?" He mutters, looking at Phil with a dark glint in his eyes. "If he's not guilty, then—?"

"Tommy's his little brother," Techno interrupts, staring directly at Sam. He's expressionless, mostly, but Phil has to give him a sharp look just in case. "We're family, Sam. He's not going to stop looking for him until he finds him."

He's the reason he's probably gone, Phil thinks to himself bitterly. He can't speak for Wilbur; can't reveal his son's detriments without permission, no matter how much he wishes to defend him.

"I don't give a shit," Sam bites out, hands pressed together in a tent, form leaning over the side of the sofa. "You're not biological family. You met the kid like, six months ago or some shit. I've known Tommy for almost a year now."

"Then why are you here?" Techno questions, raising an eyebrow accusingly. Phil hisses through his teeth, casting his eldest son another look, but Sam answers with a calm tone.

"I'm here because I was suspicious. How was I supposed to know that a fifteen year old under my supervision was being picked up by some of the most notorious villains in Manberg?" Sam spits the words like they're venom, stature moving as though prepared to pounce on Techno. "Tell me, with full honesty, how would you act? Would you really continue your search where you have literally no leads, or would you go right to the house where you're certain they have him?"

Silence falls, and the new person— Charlie— takes this opportunity to speak, clearing his throat.

"If Wilbur doesn't have him," he begins, eyes flicking between the dark glare tossed from Sam to Phil and Techno, "Then who does? I texted my boss, he's coming here to help—"

At this, Phil jolts, turning wildly, "Your boss? Who's your boss?"

Charlie tilts his head, "He doesn't really like people knowing his name—"

"If he's coming to my house, I deserve to know who he is," Phil interjects, mouth pressing itself into a thin line. "I don't even like people coming here to begin with, it's a wonder you fucks found out where I live in the first place."

The stranger hums, shrugging his shoulders.

"It was fairly easy, actually," he says, earning an elbow in the side from Ranboo, who gives him a shake of his head. Phil decides that it's best he doesn't question it until after they find Tommy. There's far too much going on for him to focus on; a part of him wishes that Kristin were here.

"Just..." Phil exhales, rubbing at his temples, "Just tell me his name, alright? I'm swearing a truce until we find Tommy with every party except the one that's potentially got him— if there is one— so it's safe. Alright?"

Charlie frowns a little for a second, thinking this over, then beams.

"Oh, really?" He sounds excited. Phil worries for whoever his boss may be; this guy was far too convincable. "If you're certain, then I'll tell you. I always like telling people about him, he's super cool, you know? I'm very proud of him and all of his accomplishments. He built



Las Nevadas all on his own, from the ground up! It was very impressive. I watched the whole thing! He's even got video games in there. Tommy's favourite was always *PacMan*."

Through Charlie's constant rambling about his 'boss,' the temperature in the room feels as though it's dropped twenty degrees. The slow realization of just exactly who Charlie worked for, conglutated with the simple knowledge that he'd been best friends with *Tommy* of all people, makes a cold chill rush through Phil's veins.

With it, his head swivels in Techno's direction, who has already left the room with the clicking of heavy boots.

As if the day couldn't have gotten any more stressful.

---

Quackity leans forwards, opening the center console of his car and pulling out a package of Dramamine. To his left, Purpled gives him a scathing look, as if to say, 'Are you seriously going to pass out at a time like this?'

The answer was: yes. Quackity was scared. *Horrified*, if he was being completely honest (albeit, he never was). Everything about this situation screamed of his death near the end or, even worse, Tommy's death. The kid was gone, disappeared out of nowhere with no sign nor note left behind. To make matters worse, it was his birthday (and his present was tucked underneath the passenger seat, wrapped as delicately as possible in paper decorated with poker chips).

Charlie had told him that his disappearance could've had something to do with the Craft family, which had him twisting his neck in every which way to not glance at the passenger side mirror. The last thing he'd want is to get a good sight of the still blooming bruises near the base of his nose, a gift from none other than the Bard— or, well, *Wilbur Craft*, as he went by in civilian terms. (He even sounded like a stuck-up asshole beyond his supervillain persona).

It's just wonderful, really, for him to find out that's where Tommy's been for the past couple of months. Staying with a bunch of fucking murderous villains and making friends with them ("Family, actually," Charlie had corrected over the phone much to his chagrin).

As much as he wanted to be pissed off at Tommy for not telling him about any of it, he couldn't find it in his heart to be anything but concerned for the kid. He shouldn't be; feelings, emotions of any sort, shouldn't be something he still allows himself to feel after the incident, but he's not a psychopath. He's not emotionless, he doesn't have a face of something forcefully stilled.

Quackity's... he's not even sure himself. The countless times that he's tried to speak with Puffy, she's turned him away, something anxious glinting in her eyes at the mere sight of him on her doorstep. He understands, of course. She has a duty to protect, a job to serve in the Hero Complex— he was nothing but a hero who'd "fallen from grace" just like Tommy, although his story was far different.

While everyone thought Tommy's persona was dead, they knew Quackity's had reformed itself into something different. Many theorists that walked the street were right. While his old hero persona was dead, *Jester* was very much alive. The thought made him sick to his stomach; he takes another Dramamine.

"You're going to pass out," Hannah's voice comes from behind him, whacking a hand against his shoulder irritably. "Don't take too many of those. You won't be able to fucking walk while we're trying to find the kid."

Quackity huffs, adjusting himself in the passenger seat to glance back at her. She's sitting professionally, one leg over the other, lips pursed in a mixture of anxiety and aggravation. She always got easily irritated with him, but he couldn't blame her. When Slimecicle wasn't around, Hannah and Purpled had to deal with Quackity's complaining all day.

"I won't pass out," he defends, turning back in his seat and crossing his arms over his chest. They're somewhere downtown in Manberg, taking a left on a street that Quackity's never been down. He has a feeling that they're heading either to one of the richer neighbourhoods of this city, or the outskirts. "I can hold my own, you know. I'm just as worried for Tommy as you are."

Hannah snorts. It's hollow.

"You're *worried* for him," she repeats, voice slightly higher in sarcasm. Quackity glances upwards at the rearview mirror, making eye contact with her. Something glints in brown eyes, sharp and as venomous as her claws.

"Do you have something you want to tell me before we get to the house of, I don't know, the most famous supervillains in the city that should be dead?" Quackity questions, tilting his head to the right. It was true—the Syndicate should've died in the fire he'd started. They should have collapsed by his hands, just as Morpheus and the rest of the guy's crowd should've. Neither did, though, and he can't help but feel as if destiny's laughing at him all over again.

*Maybe he deserves to feel this way*, a part of him whispers, tugging at the back of his head the way it has done for months. *He's the one who abandoned Tommy first, who kept so many secrets from him, the one who had forced him into something that dismantled...*

Quackity rolls down the passenger window, sticking his head out and allowing the wind to brush against his face, to echo through his ears. Not today, he figures. He'll wallow in self pity later; for now, find Tommy.

*(And apologize, the voice speaks again. He doesn't ignore it).*

---

Niki rubs at her temples, leaning her elbows onto her knees. They'd been searching for hours, talking to people on the street and even retracing their footsteps. Each time, they've gone in a circle, always ending up back at Tommy's pond Sam had told them about.

There's nothing. Not a single trace of Tommy has been left behind. Not a footprint, not a sticky note tacked to a tree, nothing. It's as if he disappeared into thin air (and a part of her, somewhere buried deep, begins to wonder if this was on purpose. If something had happened to him, or if he had figured something out about someone close to him, and had bolted).

Beside her, clothes rustle and Jack lets out a sharp exhale as he flops onto the bench.

"Nothing," he complains loudly, "Not a single fuckin' clue. It's like—"

"He disappeared into thin air?" She echoes her own thoughts, tilting her head to the left a little to give Jack a wry smile. He matches her expression, eyes blinking a few times to get over the shock. It wasn't abnormal for the two of them to have similar thoughts, or treks in which they traveled.

"Exactly," Jack confirms, nodding a little. Sweat shines on his forehead and he wipes it with the back of his hand, breathing out warily. "It's... just, I don't know. Something feels fishy about this whole situation, don't you think? First he goes missing, then this stranger gets involved, and it's his birthday. Isn't it... convenient to you at all?"

Niki hums, thinking this over for a moment. Jack was right, really; it was pretty convenient, the order in which everything had happened. Tommy's birthday, he disappears, the new kid rolls into town, the reveal of who the Crafts were (which, really, she knew, but it was still slightly anticlimatic in her opinion. Still, if they had been the ones who did this, they're going to wish she had never found out about their identity).

"It's weird," she admits slowly, leaning upwards and brushing her hair from her face. She pauses, pursing her lips, then turns to her friend, decision made. "I... I don't know, Jack, do you think that he could've left on purpose?"

Blinking a few times, Jack frowns, "On purpose? What do you mean?"

"Like..." she exhales, leaning back against the bench, hands splayed out in front of her.

"Picture you're Tommy, right? You're in Manberg, you're fifteen years old, and you're pretty much by yourself. You've got nothing but a few friends and potentially some people you call family, like Phil, Techno, and Wilbur."

If Jack notices how she says the last name with a bit more aggression, he doesn't comment on it.

"Alright..." Jack raises an eyebrow, leaning one arm over the back of the bench, turning his full attention to his best friend. "I'm picturing it as best as I can manage, I suppose. Go on."

"Well, if you found out that your best friends and sort-of-family were notorious supervillains, how would you feel?" Niki's shoulders relax slightly at finally being able to get this into verbal words. It had been churning in her thoughts all morning, slowly brewing until something were to shatter.

By the look on Jack's face, he knows exactly what she means. His eyebrows pull together and he sits up straighter, the way he usually does when Niki presents him with a new job they have somewhere in town.

"So you think he found out about something and ran?" He asks, and she nods.

"Not just that, but I think that Charlie— whatever his name is, the *stranger*— may be able to help us find out what," she responds, although she's not entirely sure on that part. It was more of a small theory that she'd had positioned somewhere in her mind, like a one-page file tucked into a cabinet for safe-keeping but never brought to flourition. But, if she's going all out on the theories, she may as well say all the ones that she has.

Jack hums, clapping his hands together, "Well, that's a good excuse to get out of the sun and into some air conditioning, I'd say. I'll call Sam if you grab a taxi?"

She nods, straightening her spine, pausing to wince. The throbbing in her head has only grown worse, a side effect of both heat exhaustion and... well, overall exhaustion, she figured.

"Only if we can stop for some Advil on the way," she grumbles, standing as Jack does and nudging him lightly in the side. "This whole thing's giving me a pretty killer headache."

Jack just shoots her a grin, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and jostling her, "Anything for my basically little sister."

"Shut up."

---

Tommy's throat is hoarse. Where once he had wished the flourescents would just go away, he now wishes that they'd come back. Dream had turned them off at some point when he was asleep (somehow he'd slept, he wasn't sure what had willed him to do so), only to leave him submerged completely in darkness.

A part of it brings the feeling of deja vu crawling up his back, threatening like a shadow that's stuck to his skin and his wings. Another part of it makes his throat close up as if he's being asphyxiated, heavy water pushed down onto his chest and against his throat.

For a long time, Tommy's had mixed feelings about the dark. On one hand, he liked the serenity of it all; of the calm feeling that was brought in the ambience of night. Maybe, though, that was simply because he had a window to look out from at the lights of the city when he grew too afraid of the pitch black. Now, he has nothing. Not a single light, not a window, nothing but his heavy and ragged breaths, the occasional jingling of chains against the cold floor.

Sometimes, when Dream visits, he brings a candle. It's bright and burning through the darkness, a sharp contrast that immediately draws his eyes. Something, buried deep and lodged in the wings that are torn to shreds and the antennae that twitch this way and that, wants to stare at the candlelight forever. Another part, one that's much better when it comes to self preservation, is aware enough to snap his gaze away.

It's only another reason to add to the steadily growing list of why he hates Dream's visits. The obvious already took up half a metaphorical page in his mind, the newer ones only seemed to make it grow. Slowly, and progressively, he was beginning to remember why he wanted his former mentor dead.

The months had made him tiresome, had lured him into a false sense of security that was only shattered when he was pulled from his and Quackity's old apartment (he couldn't even remember how long ago that was. Days? Weeks? A month, even? He didn't know— he could hardly tell what time of day it was in the first place).

Every now and then, he prays. To what, he wouldn't know. After what he's seen, what he's known, he isn't so sure he believes in any sort of god anymore. A part of him has and always will believe in Death and whomever they may be with how they've inflicted his life, but everything has goaded him not to. Even thinking about it forms a headache just at the side of his head and near the base of his neck.

Soon, it's like clockwork.

Dream enters the basement with a candle and a tray of food, stares at him in silence, then leaves. This continues (and the food grows stale), until the day comes that he speaks.

Tommy's curled up in the corner of the cell, knees pressed to his chest and head buried in them, when the man clears his throat. Almost immediately, he tosses his attention the hero's way, holding back a sneer.

"Do you know why you're here, Tommy?" He asks, and Tommy recoils immediately.

"Don't fucking call me that," he hisses out, voice gravelly with misuse. "Don't call me that. Ever."

Dream hums, tilting his head to the right. He doesn't look offended, but curious.

"When you were a kid that's what you wanted me to call you," he states, kneeling to the ground to place the tray of food— the same as it always is; a bottle of something swirling with pure black that Tommy hasn't touched, and a bowl of foul smelling liquid. "You tried to get me to call you by your 'real name,' remember? You got so pissy with me when I called you Theseus off the field, and now that's all you want me to call you?"

Blowing a breath out from his mouth, Dream picks the candle up, knees straightening as he does.

"You're giving me real whiplash here," he spits. Even though his face is concealed behind a mask, Tommy can't help but feel he's staring right at him. "What the fuck is it, then? *Theseus* or *Tommy*?"

A pause, and then the tray clatters as Dream kicks it underneath the cell bars. Tommy bites the wound on the inside of his cheek to keep from yelping.

"Theseus is dead," Dream says after a moment, and Tommy's veins fill with something icy cold. He turns, eyes wide as he stares directly at the hero.

Neither of them say another word for a good while, and then Dream's the first to speak, as he has been for however long Tommy's been behind bars.

"Drink your soda," he speaks, a threat that sends a shiver down Tommy's spine. "If I come back to stale food again, you're not going to get any again."

Tommy turns his head, burying it into his knees. He waits until the sound of heavy boots has grown distant and the heaviness of the basement door echoing against the empty walls has entered his ears, before letting out a shaky sob.

*If only Quackity could see him now*, he thinks bitterly, cheeks pressed between his knees.

---

Convenience stores smell like shit.

Not a particularly awful scent if you don't mind the overwhelming amount of bleach and carpet cleaner, but it makes Niki's nose wrinkle.



"Did you find the Advil?" Jack questions, poking his head out from around one of the shelves. He looks so funny with a comedically large hat placed atop his head, the price tag still waving around whenever he moves his neck.

Niki can't help but snort, raising her eyebrows. She shouldn't be laughing, not when there's a kid missing, but she can't help it.

Slowly, she waves around the package of Advil, "Got it. I'm not paying for that stupid hat too, though. That's on your paycheck."

"What the fuck?" Jack complains jokingly, frowning. "I thought you said you were paying. Are you just gonna do me like that, mate?"

Snorting, Niki walks forwards, smacking the hat off of Jack's head as she passes him. He squawks indignantly, flailing around as he turns to grab it back up off the ground.

"I'm paying for my Advil," she restates, walking towards the front of the store to pay, grinning wildly at the bristling sound her friend makes. Craning her neck so that she can glance over her shoulder at Jack, she adds, "Pretty messed up of you to be joking about when Tommy's missing, you know."

Affronted, the man scoffs, "I'm just trying to lighten the mood, Niki. Damn."

Niki turns, facing forwards, "I know, just—"

She stops dead in her tracks, staring wide-eyed just outside the front entrance of the store.

Standing as though he belonged, as if he wasn't someone that deserved to burn the day he tried to burn her and everyone she cared for, is Quackity. Or, well, Jester— she was fully

aware of who he was, especially with the way his hair was tucked under an annoyingly familiar beanie. His hand is wrapped around a phone, pressed to his ear.

Part of her wishes to grab her gun from its holster and take him down right then and there, but another knows that it would just make finding Tommy all the more difficult. Sam had informed her and Jack on the phone that he had been friends with Tommy once, that he was one of their closest ways of knowing where the kid could be (other than Wilbur, who they'd already crossed off the list. As much as that relieved her for the time being, she still kept a special place in the barrel of her gun in case he was found guilty).

"What is it?" Jack asks, now exactly beside her.

Without saying a word, Niki nods her head forwards at where Jester's stood. Jack sucks in a breath, entire form tensing.

"Should we talk to him?" He asks, and Niki huffs, shooting him a look.

"Haven't got much of a choice, have we?" She responds through her teeth, pointer finger and thumb pressing against her knuckles until they pop. "Keep a level head, though. Don't blow a casket—remember what Sam said. He's our closest ally to finding Tommy. Oh, and—" she presses the Advil into Jack's hand, "Buy this for me, will you? I don't feel like going to jail for shoplifting tonight."

Jack frowns, fumbling with the box of medication in his hands, "What? Are you serious? You said—"

"I know what I said," Niki snaps. Jack blinks a few times, then exhales.

"Alright, alright. Just... follow your own advice, okay?" He reaches out to pat her shoulder with care, "Don't blow a casket."

She tosses him a wry smile, "I'll do my best."

With hesitation, Jack returns it.

"Let's get this over with, then," he mutters, striding towards the cash register with Niki on his heels, "I really don't want to have a fight outside of a drugstore, but I will if I have to."

In any other situation, she figures that she would have laughed.

The two part ways at the front of the store, Jack standing (rather reluctantly) in line, and Niki exiting through the sliding glass door.

Almost the second she walks out, Jester turns fluidly to face her (clearly, this guy's got as good of instincts as she do), there's a moment to let the dust settle. They stare, meeting each other's eyes, and it's Jester who speaks first.

"Nemesis," he greets, grinning a little. It shows off his signature gold tooth. "Great to see you again! Where's your buddy Dimensional? Miss that guy. Always great to have around."

Gritting her teeth, Niki forces herself to calm down.

"Can't say the same," Niki responds, arms crossed over her chest. She huffs, blowing a strand of pink hair out of her face, "Dimensional's inside paying for something. He'll be out in a minute, though. For now, it's just me and you."

Jester hums, shrugging his shoulders a little. A plastic bag dangles from his wrist, but she can barely tell if its carrying anything inside of it.

"I'm guessing you two are looking for Tommy too, then?" Jester questions, tilting his head to the right. It uneases her, in a way a predator would examine its prey. (Almost reminding her of Morpheus. The realization makes her shiver). "Kind of weird, really. Didn't expect that you

were that great of friends with the kid. He's really gotten himself into a load of trouble since I've been gone."

Something harsh and sickly forms in her throat, like the licking of flames at her fingertips. With barely concealed rage, Niki takes one step towards Jester, her jaw clenched.

"If you weren't our best chance to finding him," Niki takes a step closer, getting close to his face so that he knows how serious she is, "I'd tear you limb from limb right here. Or, better yet, I'd get Jack to open dimensions while I light you on fire. A mixture of nausea and pain might be enough to quell what you've taken from us."

A pause, and then Jester's grin widens, as if this thought excites him.

"I was wondering when you'd show your true colours, Nemesis," he states, almost mockingly. "It's funny to see what the arsonist does when she's no longer pulled beneath the ropes of what made her."

Reeling back as though she'd been slapped, Niki hisses through her teeth.

"You have no right to fucking—" she pauses, staring at something over the villain's shoulder. A coattail, familiar in colour, disappearing just behind the wall of the convenience store. Silver linings catch in the moonlight, heavy shoes echoing against the sidewalk, and her breath catches in her throat.

Jester says something, but she ignores it, quickly pulling her phone from her pocket and dialing a number.

"Sam?" She breathes, hands shaking as she presses the receiver to her ear, eyes stuck on where she'd seen the person disappear. "I think I just saw Wilbur."

---

The street is bare at night, and Phil presses his lips together from beneath his mask. He was growing weary. Not hearing from Wilbur in hours was the simply a stem amongst the various roots that dragged him to the Earth, pulling and prodding at him.

Beside him is Ranboo and Tubbo, both of whom were currently speaking with one another animatedly. Phil could see the tension in their shoulders, the way they kept glancing over at him between words, but he didn't mind. He couldn't possibly think of what they were going through right now, of the worry that they were feeling. They were only kids, after all, just like Tommy.

Tommy; the root of it, and his stomach curls a little. He'd been close to adopting the kid, and he'd disappeared. The thought gave him a series of emotions, each one overpowering the other. Techno and Wilbur had known, of course. They were the ones who had endorsed the idea in the first place. Phil was convinced by the day they'd brought Tommy home, shaking and sick.

(Something tells him that he'd been convinced before that point, somewhere in the months that he'd employed Tommy, but he still hadn't quite known him then. He knows him now, knows some parts of his life, and knows what he's like in some ways. Everything about Tommy is important to him, just as each of his sons are).

"Jack just called," Sam interrupts Phil's train of thought, causing the man to flinch a little. He turns, looking at the man, who has taken his hybrid suppressor off by now. With it, smoke trickles from his gas mask, floating into the air like clouds escaping his mouth.

Phil holds back a wince.

"What'd he say?" He asks instead, a small bubble of hope rising in his chest. Please, tell me that he's okay. That he's alright, that nothing's happened.

The look on Sam's face doesn't do him any justice.

"Apparently, they ran into Jester on the way here," he begins, and Phil huffs, turning his head away. Jester— how ironic it was that the very vigilante Wilbur had been sent to kill for

betrayal was the one that Tommy had once been friends with. How ironic it was that it was the very same person who had been a part of the Banquet (which only brings the thought back to the surface of Tommy being involved in the very scenario, but he pushes it away).

"And?"

"They're all coming," Sam says after a moment, shifting his weight and readjusting the trident in his right hand. It gleams in the night, the classic enchantments bruising the darkness in a way that screams The Warden. "All of them— Jester, Jack, Niki, and some of Jester's friends. They said..."

Sam pauses, glancing over his shoulder at where Tubbo and Ranboo stand. Now, Charlie's joined them, talking very enthusiastically about something that Phil can't quite name.

The Warden turns back to him, eyes registering something grim.

"They said that they saw Wilbur," he begins, sounding slightly wary. "Not... exactly, though. They saw a glimpse of him running past the convenience store they had all stopped at. Niki said she knew it was him because of the trail of his coat, dark with silver engravings. He looked like he was in a hurry to get somewhere."

Phil exhales, shoulders drooping. Not in relief, but in something, as if the weight of the world has settled itself upon his back.

"Alright," he just says, rubbing a hand down his face. "I'll give him a call. He... I doubt he'll answer me. He usually doesn't when he's like this, but it's worth a shot. I'll get Techno to find him if he doesn't. He's good at that sort of thing."

When Sam grimaces slightly, eyes crinkling at the corners in something between disgust and concern, Phil ignores it.

He turns on his heel, walking a couple paces down the sidewalk, pulling his communicator from his pocket and scrolling through his contacts. He had Wilbur saved to his favourites, so it was never difficult to find his name—

As if reading his mind, his phone starts ringing, loud and bright. It's loud and shocking enough that he nearly drops it onto the ground for the fiftieth time that month alone (*"Fucking old, you are,"* Tommy had jeered once with a grin. The memory makes his chest hurt).

Holding the phone with forcibly steadied hands, Phil squints at the contact name, and his stomach drops.

With hesitation, he presses *answer* and brings the phone to his ear.

"Hey, Kristin," he murmurs, guilt pressing up against his back, wings tucking in on themselves. "Everything okay?"

## Chapter End Notes

formal apology for that previous chapter, i was feeling EVIL >:D here's my apology, though, in the form of ?!?! omg ?!?! a new chapter ?!?!

coughs. anywho! i wrote this. literally in one day again, so i'm sorry if it isn't the best:D <33 i hope that all of u are doing well and i want to remind u that this fic is 1) written just for fun and 2) that we have some pretty heavy themes going on & coming up *very* soon, so stay safe & be cautious!!

on that note, MUMZA!!!! ohohohoh mumza time. who cheered!!! :DD

# it's been you and me since before i was me

## Chapter Summary

"What about the Latin phrase, then?" Wilbur leans his head to the right, tucking the phone against his jaw so that he can properly dust some of the snow off of the lettering. *"Alea iacta est."* You paid more attention in that class than I did. Do you know what it means?"

There's a slight pause, and then Techno mutters, *"The die has been cast. It's a phrase from Julius Caesar's era. It's said to imply the symbolism of going past a point of no return. Hence, death."*

A snowflake, delicate and hard to see to the untrained eye, falls on Wilbur's glove. It melts almost immediately, sinking into the fabric.

"Something's not right," he whispers, shaking his head against the phone. "I still don't get it. How could that—"

It clicks, suddenly, like someone had shoved him square in the chest and knocked every wisp of air from his lungs.

or, wilbur's piecing some things together, bamf niki nihachu is suddenly a tag im adding, & tommy learns some things about his past that he didn't originally know. uh oh!

## Chapter Notes

*tws*: implied past mcd, violence, gore, very heavy emotional manipulation & gaslighting, after effects of drinking a potion (magic-related sickness?), veerrrryyy gray morals displayed (but not defended), unreliable narrator, & overall very dark themes. please let me know if i've forgotten any warnings!! <3 /gen

*please* be careful reading this chapter—it's one of the worst yet when it comes to manipulation & overall violence. if you want to skip past the manipulative parts, i highly suggest you *stop reading* when you get to tommy's pov later on.



---

There was a time, back when he was a kid, that Wilbur had witnessed his twin brother nearly die.

It was during a match that Techno wasn't supposed to fight— his mentor (their father, rather) had warned him that it would be too much. As much as he was strong, as much as he could hold his own, the opponent was stronger.

They stood a whole foot or so taller than Techno despite being only two years apart, broad shoulders and burly arms. The first time that Wilbur had seen them, he'd been terrified to the core, clutching onto his mother's skirts and watching with a wary look while Techno wrapped his hands in gauze. That was one of the first times that he'd truly been afraid of something.

Seeing the way that the person looked at his brother, as if he was prey, as though he was nothing but another ragdoll to fight with and win— it had boiled his blood.

Wilbur knew his father had been right— that deep down his mother was just as terrified as he felt— but he couldn't find the words to speak up and say something. It was as if they had all died in his throat, disappearing like ink when paper is dipped into water.

It was in the middle of the second round that he finally moved from where he'd been standing. Techno was losing; not terribly, he was doing pretty well at holding his own, but he was still losing. There was blood on the mats, on the ropes, on his hands... and Wilbur acted before he could think.

No words were said, no looks exchanged, he had just *moved*.

In a second, he blinked out of existence, and in the next, he was standing behind his brother's opponent with his elbow crooked around their neck. It only took one look at Techno's frown, at his mother's horrified expression, at the dark look on their father's face, before he let his arm move.

They were the first person that he killed— his first death, done by his own hands. He was still the youngest in the family, the 'little brother' despite only being younger than Techno by a few minutes. It didn't matter to him.

(A few years later, a similar instance would occur, but the roles would be reversed, and the blood would be on Techno's hands instead. The only difference was multiple died, whereas Wilbur had only killed one).

It's like deja vu, the way Wilbur acts the second Techno pulls him into the kitchen. His brother's telling him to breathe, to focus, to not allow himself to fall beneath the toll of his mind, but it doesn't work. He pushes him away, slams the back door open, and takes off.

Like a broken record, a repeat of history, there are hardly any words spoken. Wilbur's out of the house, running through alleyways and retracing any footsteps that his little brother could've taken, just as he had the first time. The only difference is there is no opponent, nobody that he has to fight, no saving to be done. There's just himself, the open roads and darkened alleyways, and the missing family member.

Wilbur recalls how everyone's dynamics had changed completely because of the Incident. Where Techno and Wilbur grew closer, more tightly knit— protective, was the better word, of one another— their parents grew distant. Not particularly on purpose, and not from each other, but simply in general.

Kristin had more out-of-country jobs to attend, Phil opened the bookstore... and it escalated.

The crime in town, just next door, just down the street— all of it, and with it, they moved, like a plywood drifting out to sea.

Phil considered them 'villains,' himself included; they weren't heroes, and as much as Wilbur tossed around the term 'vigilante,' he knew that they were nothing close to what Ranboo and Tubbo were. They weren't good; they killed people, they took lives, but none of them enjoyed it.

As much as Techno preached the 'Blood God' act, or as much as Phil was proclaimed 'Death's Angel,' it wasn't as though they enjoyed cleaning the dried blood from their hands. Never innocent people, never anyone who didn't deserve it— but who, in reality, could be classified as someone who *deserved* it?

Phil always said that it was those who preyed on others; Techno thought it to be anyone that tried to hurt family. Wilbur simply didn't know; thinking it over made his head hurt.

Sometimes, he thought it might be heroes. They were meant to be enemies, right? He was supposed to hate heroes, but he didn't. Sure, he had no particular liking to their structure (the hierarchy, the disgusting allegations he'd heard about the certain system inducted within the Complex itself), but it wasn't as though he wanted to *kill* them.

And yet, he could still remember the time that he'd stood in the bathroom, staring at the scar on his face in the mirror, one given to him by one of the number one heroes.

It should've been a death blow, something that cut him down and laid him to finally rest in a coffin decorated in blue flowers, but it wasn't. They had played with him, had made him think that he'd die, only to give him a scar that would never heal.

The person who'd given it to him was someone who enjoyed it, who liked the kill.

*Morpheus*, they are called. Wilbur could see it in the black paint of his dull eyes, in the way he tilted his head (calculating, cold; like a bird stalking its prey). It sickened him, every part of it. The pure idea of someone *enjoying* taking a life, removing it from existence... the concept wasn't something that he could understand when it came to innocent people. To think that he— that his *family*— owed something to the guy only made the nausea worse.

(The reminder, buried in the ashes that stuck to his throat only four weeks or so previously, indulged into the hands that burned for hours, makes him almost regret coming out of that Banquet alive.)

People that weren't innocent, however, like the ones that he'd killed in the past... he supposes, in a way, he could see it. He could feel relief at the sight of someone that had hurt the ones he

loved being gone, erased from the world. However, it did nothing to quell the nightmares or the feeling of something crawling in his skin. Really, it only seemed to make it worse.

He wasn't a good person, his family weren't good people— *Tommy* should know that.

Wilbur suspects that, if he ever does, it may kill him.

It's for the best, though, and he knows that. Tommy deserves a good life, a better one, exponentially more than Wilbur or the rest of his family could give him. They had a record. Tommy did not. He didn't deserve one.

The thought makes him halt, blinking furiously. His mind snaps like a rubber band in place and he raises his head, hands shaking by their sides, chest heaving. He'd been running for who knows how long, and now he has no clue where he was. It seems familiar, like he's stood in exactly this spot before— there's iron fencing, there's flowers, and then there's a gravestone.

*Oh*, a part of him realizes, staring at the engraving. He bends, knees pressing into the cold of the snow, fabric soaking in the cold. The gravestone is new, only done in the last year or so, but untouched since then. The flowers placed by it are wilted, draped in the new snowfall, and the engraving itself already looks worn.

Wilbur presses closer to get a better look at it, eyes moving across the lettering.

**Theseus Innit, 20XX-20XX.**  
**'The best sidekick I could've asked for.'**  
*Alea iacta est.*

For a moment, he stares at the wording, two different feelings swirling in the pit of his stomach. The first, nostalgia; he'd heard that Latin phrase before somewhere. The second, and most confusing, was *horror*.

It's a weird feeling to have, considering that he'd never even known Theseus that well. As far as his knowledge went— and it bothered him that this was the only thing he knew— was that he'd been Morpheus' sidekick. His death was a tragedy, a fall from the top of the Complex to

his death. Techno had talked about it for ages, about how the press was lying in their idea of it being suicide, all of these theories that Wilbur couldn't possibly wrap his head around.

So why does he care *now*? He hadn't known Theseus, hadn't ever met him in action—he hadn't even known that the hero had a *last name*.

Then, he frowns, eyebrows pulling together with shock.

A last name.

They'd put a last name on the hero's gravestone, but not his first name, unless his first name had been Theseus, although that was very unlikely—who would use their actual name as part of their hero persona? It didn't make sense.

He exhales a breath, eyes flicking to the last name itself. There was something odd about it. *Innit*. Something familiar settled against his neck, fraying with his hair, the itchy feeling of not knowing returning into his hands.

Without a second thought, he pulls his phone from his pocket, fumbling with it for a moment before pressing on Techno's contact name. It barely rings twice before his brother picks up, sounding slightly tired but more concerned.

"Wil," his brother's tone is gruff, on edge. *"Where are you? Do I need to come get you? Look, I'm glad you called, there's something I need to tell you about. Phil got a call earlier—"*

"I need your help with something real quick. You don't need to come here, just..." Wilbur huffs, his breath coming out in a gust of fog. He brushes his fingertips against the engraving again, the cold of stone seeping into them. "I'm going to read something to you. Can you tell me if it sounds familiar?"

A pause as something rustles on the other side of the receiver, and then Techno exhales.

*"Alright. Read it to me, but then tell me if you're at least safe."*

Ignoring that last comment, Wilbur hums a little, beginning to read exactly from the headstone.

*"Theseus Innit, The best sidekick I could've asked for. Then, there's some Latin phrase, says something like... Alea—"*

*"Alea iacta est,"* Techno's monotone comes over the phone, *"I know. I've visited the grave quite a few times. Why are you there, Wil? Listen, there's a few people on their way to the house that might be able to help us find Tommy, we need you back here. You and I are the best trackers, you know that, and Phil—"*

"Does something sound strange about the guy's name to you?" Wilbur interrupts, lips pursed. *"'Innit.'* It's their last name, isn't it? On the headstone, they put the person's hero name, and then their surname. Why wouldn't they put the sidekick's first name, like, *their* real one? Why even bother putting the last if they didn't put the first?"

Techno exhales again, *"I don't know, Wil. Really. I've thought about it a lot, alright? It's just one of those things that don't make sense, no matter how many times you toss it around in your head."*

Wilbur clicks his tongue, displeased.

"What about the Latin phrase, then?" He leans his head to the right, tucking the phone against his jaw so that he can properly dust some of the snow off of the lettering. *"Alea iacta est.'* You paid more attention in that class than I did. Do you know what it means?"

There's a slight pause, and then Techno mutters, *"'The die has been cast.'* It's a phrase from Julius Caesar's era. It's said to imply the symbolism of going past a point of no return. Hence, death."

A snowflake, delicate and hard to see to the untrained eye, falls on Wilbur's glove. It melts almost immediately, sinking into the fabric.

"Something's not right," the man whispers, shaking his head against the phone. "I still don't get it. How could that—"

It clicks, suddenly, like someone had shoved him square in the chest and knocked every wisp of air from his lungs. There was a time once when he'd been pushing the swing in his backyard, pretending that he was pushing his imaginary friend on it. Someone had called his name for dinner and that was all it took. One glance away, one moment of not paying attention, and the swing had come back and hit him full force in the ribs.

He couldn't breathe for a solid minute and a half. It took Techno propping him up against the trunk of the tree, one hand holding his and the other showing five fingers counting upwards, then downwards, helping him remember how to breathe. He still remembers the feeling of Kristin's hand on his back, of Phil's in his hair, all of his family trying to help him as he tried to force air back into his lungs.

This, as it seems, is the same way, but instead there's nobody there with him. He can hear Techno calling his name on the other line, but he ignores it, standing up with a clenched jaw. His phone clatters to the ground, burying itself in fresh snow by the gravestone.

*The die has been cast*— he hopes, somewhere deep down, that he won't be too late.

---

Tubbo has paced the lengthways of the Craft's living room thirteen times. The backyard he's gone through thrice; the front driveway, ten and a half (only half because, during his eleventh lap, Ranboo had called for him. Something about '*I don't want you to be out there all by yourself when Jester arrives*, ' blah blah blah. Tommy had been right to call him a mother hen).

Currently, the crowd in the room has stayed the same. Ranboo is standing by the front window, arms crossed over their chest, jaw clenched. Similar to his stance, Sam's taken a place by the fire's hearth to stare into the flames. The guy had tried to tell the two of them to leave, that they were children and shouldn't be in this mess; they both begged to differ.

It was an argument that neither of them were going to lose, no matter how Phil even pulled them aside afterwards to agree with Sam's statement. They were only children, although Ranboo was technically an adult as of five months ago. Tubbo didn't want to hear it, though. His birthday was soon.

Tubbo's in the middle of his fourteenth lap across the floor that he's long since memorized when there's a knock at the door. (Memorizing; which floorboard is the squeaky one, what part of the rug sticks up a little, and where he has to step over the leg of the coffee table that sticks out. *Rich people*, a part of him thinks with disgust. He should have warned Tommy more about them).

Before he or Ranboo even have the chance to walk in its general direction, Techno's there in a flash, striding with heavy footfalls and wrenching the door open. Tubbo withholds a grimace at the action. Someone definitely got on the guy's nerves tonight and he had a feeling who it was (with a glance at the chair Wilbur had been sitting in many hours prior).

He pauses his pacing for a moment, leaning on one foot to stare at who's standing on the threshold. A part of him feels a flood of relief at a flash of much brighter pink hair.

"Blade," Niki says, pausing on the threshold to glare up at Techno as though he'd personally wronged her. Techno blinks, form relaxing just a tad.

"Ne— *Niki*. Jack," he greets, turning his head to glance at Jack, who's just taken his place beside his friend.

An uncomfortable pause. Tubbo coughs out a laugh, ignoring the warning look he's shot by Ranboo.



Niki meets his eyes from the threshold and gives him a slight smile, brushing past Techno with Jack close by her side. The door shuts behind her, clicking shut gently.

When she steps into the living room, her expression fades, clearly catching sight of a sourly empty chair. She must visit often, then, if she knows that's Wilbur's.

She turns, not bothering to take a seat even as Jack does, facing Techno again.

"Have you heard any word from your brother since I called you about him?" She questions, sounding slightly bitter even still. Tubbo doesn't blame her.

A small pause, but Techno's face is expressionless.

"No," he answers, readjusting the cloak tossed over his shoulders. It's the Blade's iconic red one, lined with fur and decorated in gold on the clasps. Tubbo's never gotten close enough to see it, but he's certain there's an engraving on them, something in the shape of a crown. "I'm going to go looking for him, though. Bad enough Tommy's missin', now him."

"Why did he leave in the first place?" Niki's arms cross over her chest, head tilting. "If he's not guilty like all of you have implied, then why'd he dip? I almost went after him myself, but I was a little distracted at the moment. Didn't want to desert Jester in my pursuit of the Bard — two villains at once. Not a very pretty sight, hmm?"

Techno grimaces slightly at the name drop. Something deep down inside Tubbo cheers Niki on.

"Distress," he answers, casting her a look. It's not a good one. "You know Wilbur. You've seen what he can be like sometimes."

A pause, and Niki exhales, shoulders drooping. She nods a curt thing, turning on her heel and swiftly sitting herself beside Jack.

"You'll miss Jester if you leave right now," she warns as she gets comfortable against the cushions. Techno's hand pauses over the door handle.

If he had planned on going out, why had he closed it again in the first place? Tubbo wonders, wishing he could say this out loud. (Really, there are a dozen things he wishes that he could say aloud, but he forces himself to keep quiet.)

"Is he nearly here?" Techno mutters, eyes flicking to meet Niki's.

"Five minutes away. He left right after we did," Jack speaks for her, leaning his head to make eye contact with the villain. He gives him a sharp, what classifies as a *Jack Manifold* grin. He glances over his shoulder, then, "Also hi, Tubbo. You haven't said a word to me this whole time and I find that vaguely concerning."

"Your fuckin' smile is what's concerning," Tubbo quips immediately, crossing his arms. Jack huffs a laugh, turning back towards the Blade.

Techno hums, twisting the door handle, "Well, he'll just have to wait, then. On the doorstep, in the cold. Nobody talks to him until I get back," he pauses here, knuckles white over the handle, "I'll take care of him when I return. For now, I've got some business to take care of."

Niki snorts. It isn't a happy noise.

"What? Don't like working as a team?" She goads, raising an eyebrow.

Techno doesn't respond, jaw clenching slightly.

Niki continues anyways, hands splayed out, "Look, I don't like Jester either. He's an asshole, arrogant, a—"

"Piece of shit," Sam adds on. It is the first time he's spoken in hours, forcing everyone's head to immediately snap in his direction. Tubbo frowns a little, though, watching the flames of the fire dance in the man's eyes. It almost feels like he's a father in mourning, which brings a feeling of bile up Tubbo's throat. "He's a piece of shit and should never have been invited here."

"Charlie thinks that he'll help," Ranboo says, tapping their fingers against their thigh.

Sam turns his head, giving them a wry smile, "Do you really trust someone that you just met?"

A pause, and Ranboo huffs, averting his eyes.

"For once, I think I do," he admits. Tubbo blinks at this, feeling a prick of confusion.

There was rarely someone that Ranboo trusted. In truth, a year ago it had just been the two of them; coming from nothing and fashioned into vigilantes by their own hands. It was fairly recent that they'd befriended the Syndicate— it wasn't even on purpose, either.

Tubbo had never fully trusted them. Wilbur, slightly; Phil the most of all. Techno was a strange case, though, someone that he couldn't fully understand. (Not that he could understand Wilbur, either, as that man was one of the most complicated people he'd ever met, tied with Tommy himself).

He usually only put up with them because Ranboo trusted them— Phil and Techno the most, but usually he strayed towards Phil. Tubbo still didn't get it, especially with the creeping feeling that they still knew something that everyone else didn't.

Sam huffs, turning to face the flames again, "You shouldn't, especially not the likes of someone like Jester. He's deceiving, just like many others out there."

A few names linger in the air, but they go unsaid. Techno tenses slightly at where he's stood as though he'd heard them.

Instead of mentioning it, though, he just whips his head away.

"I'll be back," he comments darkly, prying the door open hard enough that Ranboo flinches slightly.

And he calls Wilbur a drama queen, Tubbo thinks, turning his head away from the sound the front door makes when it slams shut.

He's growing bored (antsy is a better word, he figures). Maybe he'll pace a couple more times, or maybe he'll just give up and make toast in the Craft's kitchen. He's memorized the whole layout of the house maybe four or more times, he's certain that getting lost wouldn't be a problem if he so needed to. (Not that Phil would care too much about him using a slice of bread— in fact, he typically encouraged it for him and Ranboo especially).

He cracks his knuckles, walking from the living room into the kitchen, ignoring the feeling of multiple eyes on his back. Nobody was going to stop him from making toast, not even the possibility of Jester— the man that had, supposedly, been behind the Banquet in the first place— arriving soon.

Ducking into the far-too-large-pantry, his fingers reach for a loaf of packaged bread.

---

Phil's nose wrinkles slightly as he enters the kitchen, a cold mug of coffee in one hand and notepad in the other. Tubbo's standing at the stove, four pans on each individual stovetop. Next to it is a paper plate stacked with... Phil exhales, using his fingertips to rub at a sore spot in his temple.

Walking past the kid— who barely even notices him as he passes— he enters the living room, blinking rapidly.

“Oh,” he states, staring at the congregation of people surrounding the coffee table. Atop it is a map that Phil was pretty sure he’d had tucked away in one of the various amount of drawers he had in this house, although he is not too certain. Around it is Niki and Jack, who he didn’t remember being here an hour ago, with Ranboo just beside them. (Sam’s still moping by the fireplace). “Uh... hey, Niki. Hey, Jack.”

He glances around, frowning a tad. There’s one particular person missing (well, two, if you counted his second eldest son, although he already knew of him storming from the house).

“Where’s Techno?” He questions, turning back to face the group that’s formed.

Niki looks up, something sour on her face that forces Phil to swallow a grimace.

“He got a lead on where Wilbur might be,” she explains, tilting her head a little. It almost feels like he’s being interrogated, although she hasn’t even asked a question. “It’s quite weird, don’t you think, that he just up and left out of nowhere? He didn’t even say anything, apparently, just left.”

“Niki, can we not?” Ranboo interjects, tapping their fingers against the coffee table. They look stressed, far more than Phil’s ever seen. He can’t find it in himself to blame the poor kid at all; if he wasn’t around so many people, he’d probably be completely all over the place right now. “It’s more important that we find out where Tommy is than to point fingers at anyone for right now.”

Niki’s jaw sets, but she nods, breathing out a long breath.

“Sorry, you’re right. Where was it you were pointing out again, Charlie?”

Jumpscare— Phil flinches at the way the guy he was sure had been perfectly normal just appears out of nowhere by Niki’s side, fading into existence with a strange *pop*.

“Right here,” Charlie points at the map, somewhere in the middle of Manberg. “It’s where—”

A knock at the front door makes everyone jolt, heads turning. In unison, Niki and Jack stiffen.

“Jester,” she grimaces over the word, and Charlie tuts.

“He doesn’t go by that anymore, you know,” he states matter-of-factly, already standing to get the door. “It’s Mimic now.”

Phil hisses through his teeth, feeling another gray hair growing somewhere on his scalp. By the end of this, he’s going to have a whole head of white and a few dead bodies in his living room. Nothing that he isn’t really *used* to at this point, minus the white haired portion.

Setting down his coffee mug on the fireplace— and shooting Sam a quick glance, although the man won’t meet his eyes— he follows as quickly on Charlie’s heels as he can.

(The guy’s like an excited puppy, really.)

He barely makes it before the door’s opening, revealing a very familiar face concealed behind a mask. Red velvet and gold vest, blue jacket hanging off of his shoulders, and an entourage of people that make him look far richer than he actually is.

“Jester,” Phil greets before Charlie can even speak. Mimic his ass— all he knew this man was Jester. Not his real name, not whatever falsehood ‘Mimic’ held.

“Archangel,” Jester tilts his head just barely, black hair falling around his ears from below the beanie. “It’s nice to see you again in a place that’s not burning to the ground.”

Phil’s throat closes slightly and he straightens his back, taking a moment to compose himself. The notepad clutched in his hand crinkles, nails digging into the paper.

“I wish I could say the same,” he smiles. It doesn’t reach his eyes. “Charlie, why don’t you bring in the rest of Jester’s guests while he and I have a little conversation?”

Charlie blinks owlishly, a small frown crossing his features. He glances between Phil and Jester, as if looking for some sort of confirmation.

“I—” he begins, eyes meeting Phil’s, then flicking back to the black of Jester’s mask.

“Listen to the man, Charlie,” Jester goads, flashing a grin that shows off a golden tooth. Something settles in Phil’s chest knowing what gave him it. “It’s his house, his rules. I’m a big boy, I can hold my own, although…” his head tilts just barely in Phil’s direction, as if scrutinizing him underneath the mask. “I truly doubt Angel over here’s going to kill me during a time like this.”

Phil clicks his tongue, lifting his chin just barely. He decides not to make a comment on this.

After a short pause, Charlie nods, tilting his head so that he can view the two people standing behind Jester’s back. They’re familiar to Phil— people he recognizes from the Banquet, unsurprisingly. A girl with fairy wings tucked behind her back and a child, one that looks far too much like Tommy if you don’t account for the two antennae sticking out of his hair and velvet purple suit. (The thought makes him sick to his stomach, so he turns away).

As much as he wishes to greet them like a proper host, he steps aside, allowing them to pass with Charlie.

“Tubbo’s making everyone toast in the kitchen,” he tells the two of them, eyes meeting Jester’s once more. “Everyone’s speaking about where Tommy could possibly be in the living room, if you’d like to join. Any information helps.”

He hears a hum of confirmation from the girl, but he ignores it.

Once their footsteps have retreated into the next room over, Jester opens his mouth to speak, but Phil shoots him a sharp look. He walks two steps forwards, leaning over the hero who's fallen from grace, hissing through his teeth.

“If you weren't our best possible chance of finding Tommy right now,” he begins, eyebrows pulling together dangerously. “Then you'd be dead right where you stand for what you did. You are going to help us, tell us everything you know on where he could be, and then you're going to leave us alone. If you don't, I'll give you another set of golden teeth.”

He pauses, letting this sink in before adding, “Is that clear?”

It's not funny, but Jester smiles anyway.

*“Crystal.”*

---

Tommy's tired. It's a constant, really, the feeling of exhaustion— everywhere he's gone, the incessant pull to the ground, the drooping of his shoulders and of his eyelids, follow him. He almost feels like he's wilting in a way. Not particularly, as he's more than ninety percent sure he isn't a flower, but the leaves that tickle his fingertips say otherwise.

Maybe it's a trick of his imagination, maybe Dream really does have a heart somewhere deep down and gave him a few plants to hold onto. He decides not to think too much about it for the sake of his own mind, for his own sanity.

Instead, he thinks of the cell itself.

He thinks of the walls surrounding him, of the bars and the chains that keep him in place, the way it feels like everything's goal is to crush every part of him. (And truthfully, he isn't really that sure how much of him there is left to begin with.)



The darkness doesn't do anything to help either, forcing his eyes to remain unfocused at a constant. It only grows worse as his head spins with uncertainty to where everything is, to the feeling of petals between his fingertips and not knowing where they'd come from. Everything was too *small*, too claustrophobic despite being so large.

He knows where he is, he'd seen the layout of the cage before he'd been thrown in, but it grows confusing. Some days, he'll hear the sounds of the city, and some others, he will hear nothing but the steady *drip-drip-drip* of water hitting the basement floor. His head hurts, his bones are weary... he just wants to rest.

At one point, Dream comes into the room, boots heavy against concrete. He brings no light with him.

"How are you feeling, Tommy?" Dream questions, tone light. It makes him sick. "I brought you more of that soda."

Tommy didn't want any of the soda. He'd smelled the last stuff— it was putrid, a swirling concoction of black. The scent was unfamiliar, very different to what he remembered from drinking Diet Cola back when Sapnap would sometimes sneak him a can when Dream wasn't looking.

"I want you to actually drink it this time, Tommy," Dream pushes the soda into the cage, the metal cup clinking with the iron bars. The sound makes Tommy flinch a little. "The sugar's good for you, you know, no matter what Ponk used to say about it rotting your teeth."

The memory of Ponk is almost enough to make Tommy smile. He misses them.

"You've always liked soda, remember?" The man continues. Something metal scrapes against the floor as he pushes it towards Tommy a little more, goading him. "You drank it all the time after training periods. Aren't you going to be nice and drink the one I bought for you with my own money from the vending machine? I even took the time to put it in a nice little cup, just for you."

A shudder runs down Tommy's spine, something bitter filling his mouth. Breathe, he tells himself. As much as Quackity has pissed you off in the past, take his advice. Listen for the manipulation, distinguish reality between false accusations; don't let him fool you.

He breathes, in and out, then glares in what he hopes is Dream's direction. He probably can't see it in the dark, but he does so anyways.

"I don't want your fucking pity soda," he hisses through his teeth, voice hoarse from being unused. It scrapes against his esophagus, and he clears his throat. A part of him wishes he had water instead of whatever the fuck Dream had given him. The thought's enough for him to also spit out, "I'm not stupid."

Dream hums, drawn out and dangerous.

"It's pretty disrespectful, don't you think?" He questions, shutting Tommy up for a moment. "I mean, I bought this for you with my own money, and..." he sighs, clothes rustling; Tommy pictures that he's waving his hands about to dramatise the situation. "Well, if you insist. I'm not bringing you any water or anything, so that's all you've got. Drink it or don't; I couldn't care less."

A pause, and then he adds, "I've already attended your funeral once before. What would it matter if I attended it for a second time? That is, if you'd even have one."

Tommy's stomach twists at this, "Don't— don't fucking *say* shit like that."

Dream laughs, loud and obnoxious, "Oh come on, Tommy, you know I'm only joking with you, right? You're not going to die, not again."

More scraping of metal against the floor. Tommy curls up further against the wall to his side, knees pressing into his chest.

"Don't," he whispers hoarsely, shaking his head. "I don't want it."

"How about this," Dream starts. Never a good sign— his proposals had always been something that benefited him more than it did anyone else. "I unlock your chains so that you can move freely around the cell, and you drink the soda. I'll leave them unlocked for a long time, so long as you drink the stuff I bring you. Does that sound like a fair deal?"

Tommy blinks, partially out of shock, and otherwise out of worry. It did sound like a fair deal. For all he knew, the drink was just soda (although it didn't sound like something Dream would ever do. He never cared enough for that, always saying that sugar had bad after effects on Tommy's performance in the field. Still, though...)

"You'll unlock the chains first?" He whispers, still uncertain.

"Yep," Dream pops the 'p,' a small characteristic that Tommy had forgotten he'd longed picked up from the man. The realization brings unease into his bones, but he shoves it away. "So you don't do anything stupid, I do want you to know that I have my gun on me. This time, it's loaded. I told you I wouldn't kill you, not like that, so I really don't want to shoot you. I will if I have to, though. It's better if you don't test me."

Tommy sucks in air through his teeth, then nods.

"Fine, alright," he shuffles around, positioning himself so that his hands, still tucked and chained behind his back, are easier to access. "I'll drink the fuckin' soda."

He can practically see Dream's grin in the darkness, "Wonderful! A good choice. Very wise of you, Tommy."

A part of him, long forgotten and lost to the day he'd been pushed off of that ledge, preens slightly at the compliment. He swallows it, dipping his head. He didn't need another near death experience to be reminded of how awful this man was; he knew, it was just difficult to remember.

The door to the cell creaks open, heavy and groaning, like it's been there for years. Tommy doesn't move, keeping himself perfectly still even as his instincts scream at him to run, wings twitching minutely behind his back.

Heavy footfalls join him in the cell, pausing until they're standing behind him. A hand grabs his wrist, a key twists into a lock, and the chains fall from where they'd anchored him to the floor with a clatter.

"There," Dream says, taking quick paced steps backwards. The door opens again and closes before Tommy even has the chance to turn around, already gingerly touching the skin around his wrists that now bloom with bruises. "I've done my part, now you do yours. If you don't, I'll add the shackles again and not return for another week."

*Another* week? Tommy shudders, a knife twisting in his gut. Had it really been a week since he'd been captured? It doesn't seem true, but he can't help but believe it. The days had been long, hours feeling like they lasted forever.

It could be true— no, it *had* to be true. (Something in him, though, shatters. It had been a long time since he'd gone and nobody had looked for him, nobody had found him. Maybe he *was* forgettable after all.)

In a daze, he pushes it away. There really was no use thinking about it now. He was too far gone at this point. Dream had him again and there was nothing anyone could do about it, even if they wanted to (something tells him nobody does, that he's been replaced since he'd left. Maybe there's a new person in his place, a new Tommy walking around Nook's, a new child for the Craft family to adopt, a new best friend for Tubbo and Ranboo to visit—)

His thoughts freeze as he shakes his head, hair falling in dirty masses around his face. Without hardly a second of hesitation, his hand tightens around the metal cup and he downs the liquid in one go.

It burns the whole way down his throat, like knives pushing and prodding at it.

For a moment, everything's okay, and he lets out a cough. One hand presses against his chest, the other holding the chilled metal.

Then, there's a type of pain that Tommy's never felt before. He lets out a high pitched scream, throwing the cup across the cell, head burying itself into his hands. He recoils, his shriek muffled by his hands, desperation swirling with overwhelming nausea in his stomach. Everything about him burned, from the tips of his fingertips all the way to his very core. It felt almost like...

"What the *fuck* did you give me?" He hisses out between breaths, words broken up as he gags, a hand clutching his stomach. His head swims, swirling, and he can hear Dream's classic hum again. This one isn't something calm, nor is it angry— instead, it's *fascinated*, as if he's watching something mildly interesting unfold before his eyes.

*A science experiment*, Tommy realizes with disgust, and the thought makes him curl in on himself, shaking violently.

"I wasn't sure if that would work or not," Dream muses. Something small hisses against the floor as a match is lit; Tommy's eyes, without his permission, go to the light immediately. He can see him now, the man with his iconic mask, sitting perfectly still in front of the cell.

One of his hands not holding the match picks up the metal cup, twisting it in his hand.

"I gave you a potion of Healing," he admits, "I wanted to see if that would have any effect on you. I guess my theory worked."

"What the fuck? What are you—" Tommy pauses, letting out a soul rattling cough, fingernails burying into his chest. He lets out a wheeze, then forces himself to continue, "Healing is meant to *heal*. I'm not fucking stupid, Dr— *cough*— Dream. I *know* you gave me a potion of Harming, I'm..."

But *was* he sure? The taste of it was so similar to the one he could remember— fermented cherry flavouring, sickly sweet, like medicine. It had burned when he drank it back then, too, but not like this. It had never made him feel like this.

"Tommy, do you remember when we found that zombie in this very basement some years ago?" Dream questions, and Tommy freezes.

It wasn't something he liked to think about. A zombie, walking and breathing, stumbling through the lowermost part of the Hero Complex. It was terrifying; every part of it, from the grumbling noises it made, to the way it looked so human. The zombies Tommy saw in movies, in television shows (all of which he watched without Dream's knowledge), looked nothing like it.

There were no green patches, no oozing substance pouring from its mouth. There was just a *human*, eyes glazed over with gray. On the floor, piled up, was green goo, like a jello that glowed a dull colour. It was awful, smelled of something bitter, but they were human. An undead one, but still a human.

The only difference, other than the walking and grumbling, was that their skin had cracks in it. It was hard to see, only if you looked closely enough, but they were there. It was as if someone had taken a porcelain doll and tapped at it lightly with a hammer— not hard enough to break, but just enough to crack.

Tommy couldn't go back into the basement for several months afterwards, terrified that another may appear out of the walls. (And as much as he asked everyone what it was, as much as he wanted to know, he never received an answer, just side-eyed looks and pursed lips).

"I do," he whispers, leaning the side of his head against the floor. His head's still swimming, the dark room's walls moving with it, so he closes his eyes. "I remember."

"Do you remember one of the things we tried to kill it?"

They had tried many things. Sapnap's flame, George's electrocity, Warden's enchanted trident... none of it had worked. The thing that had finally killed it, bringing it out of its misery, was depriving it from the sun and feeding it potions of healing. Tommy never could figure out why that had worked; could this version of zombies photosynthesize or something? It made no sense.

Wait.

"What the fuck?" Tommy coughs out hoarsely, opening his eyes and wiping his head in Dream's direction. The man's wavy with the after effect of whatever it is he'd drank, an oncoming heat flash crawling up his neck, but he fights through it. "What are you— Dream, what the fuck are you saying?"

Dream laughs, wicked and short.

"I think you know *exactly* what I'm saying, Tommy," he starts, leaning forwards, mask pressed against the bars of the cell. "I think it's about time someone told you the truth of the day you fell, don't you think?"

At this, Tommy lets out a shocked sob, shaking his head.

"No," he hisses out, "No, no, you're *lying*. You're gaslighting me again, you're fuckin'— you're nothing but a liar, a fucking manipulator. I know what happened that day, I didn't fall. You pushed me, you let me almost die, but I flew—"

"With what wings?" Dream interrupts, scoffing. He leans back a little, tilting his head to the right, black eyes deadset on the wings tucked behind Tommy's back. "You mean *those* wings? Don't you know anything about moth wings, Tommy? They're papery and easily damaged. They've been damaged for *years*. I didn't want to tell you and hurt your feelings because I'm a good friend, but I think it's time you finally knew the truth. You didn't fly that day, Tommy, because you *can't* fly. You fell, and you *died*."

"*Stop!*" Tommy shrieks, curling in on himself, back pushed as much against the wall as he can manage. "Fucking *stop!* You're lying to me, you're lying!"

"I'm not lying," Dream puts his hands up, gloved in white cloth. His tone is calm and something in it rings with genuinity, twisting a knife into the pit of Tommy's stomach. "You *died* that day, Tommy! I *watched* you die, I was there when you breathed your final breath.

And you know what? I *revived* you. I brought you back from the dead, just like everything we had been trying to do here at the Complex!"

At this point, Dream lets out a startled laugh, as if just realizing this fact now.

"You should be thanking me, you know," he begins, voice lilting in malice, "If it wasn't for me, you'd be dead right now, buried underneath that empty gravestone sitting outside the Complex. If it wasn't for *my* plan, you never would have made it to Quackity's front doorstep, never would've befriended the Crafts, and thus never have ended back in my hands!"

Tommy lets out a startled cry, a hand reaching up to clutch at his throat, "What the fuck are you talking about? How did—"

His blood runs cold, eyes widening.

The next words he speaks are hollow, in a whisper of disbelief, in hope. Hope that he's wrong, that his theory isn't right.

"How did you know that I was staying at Quackity's? No, how— how the fuck do you know who Quackity *is*?"

A pause falls over the two of them, far too long for Tommy's liking.

"Did you really think I'd let you go that easily?" Dream whispers, the words spoken with spit, directly through his teeth. He scoffs when Tommy doesn't respond immediately, settling back on his haunches. "I always knew you were a fucking idiot, but this is getting to be irritating."

Before he can respond, Dream continues, a new venom to his tone, "Did it never occur to you that this was all part of my plan? I *wanted* you to go to Quackity. I *wanted* you to adjust to civilian life, to befriend the Crafts. I *wanted* you to think that you were out of it, only for you to fall back into my hands exactly as I had planned all along."



Dream lets out a sharp laugh and suddenly, he's spreading his arms out wide, the match falling from his fingertips and rolling across the floor. By some miracle, the flame is not snuffed out, but it flickers dully.

"I've been in control this *whole time*, Tommy," Dream's laughing now through his words, his tone nothing less than maniacal. "Don't you see? This is how it's always meant to be. That world didn't deserve you, you're far too *interesting*. Your very own friend— sorry, excuse me, I mean former '*pseudo brother*'— tried to kill you! He hunted you like you were bait, and his *real* brother? His brother has wanted you dead since you hosted the Banquet! Which, by the way, never got to congratulate you on that one, absolutely fantastic party."

He can't see it, but he's certain Dream's grinning.

"Even after all this time, Jester still knows my favourite wine," he muses in a low voice to himself, arms lowering just a little. "And to think, I was certain he—"

"What are you talking about?" Tommy interrupts, voice higher than normal. His eyes sting at the corners, burning with the pain. If it's emotional or physical, he can't quite tell. "What... what are you talking about? My br— *Wilbur*— he didn't hunt me down. I never befriended villains, I actively stayed... I..."

He trails off, putting a shaking hand over his mouth to contain a sob. It couldn't be true, could it? Techno, Wilbur, Phil... they were only civilians, just like he had been (pretending to be). They had never meant any harm, had never done anything to him that could be recognized as villainous.

And yet... he knew nothing about them. Wilbur and Techno both had occupations they kept secret, they sometimes left late at night, and the emerald earrings...

Tommy lets out a cry as everything falls into place. He'd been stupid, so *incredibly* stupid. For once, he lets his guard down, he thinks that he's safe, that his friends are something more than just fake... a facade, fog covering the screen of a back porch, Christmas lights displayed in the front window of a broken household.

It makes sense, even if a part of himself wishes it didn't.

*Wilbur almost killed you, a voice whispers in his head, He put a gun to your head, chased you through an alleyway, and nearly shot you. He only stopped because that was you, he saw your face, he knew you. Your only saving grace and mercy was knowing him beforehand, otherwise...*

*No, another voice interrupts, sharp and sickeningly sweet, he wouldn't have been dead. He's already dead.*

"Oh, I know," Dream clicks his tongue in an almost familial way, as if pitying a crying child. "It's awful realizing that someone you thought you knew betrayed you, isn't it? Wilbur was like a brother to you, and yet he almost shot you that day. That's why you ran, that's why you're back with me— really, if there's anyone that I have to thank for having you back in my hands, it's Wilbur. Of course, he never knew about any of this. Neither did Quackity, as funny as that would be, but I'm sure he had his suspicions..."

Tommy lets out an uncontrolled sob, shoulders hunching in on himself. He squeezes his eyes shut, tears dripping down his cheeks, finally released from the pain that still overtakes his body.

"Don't you see it now?" Dream's voice lowers to a whisper, "You're much better back here with me, Tommy. It's safe in this basement where nobody can hurt you and I promise you, cross my heart and everything, that Wilbur and his little gang of villains will *never* find you here. They will never hurt you again. If they somehow find it..." he trails off, something sickening entering his tone, "I will pick my teeth with their bones."

At this, Tommy shakes his head rapidly, ignoring how the force of it makes him feel almost as though he's going to be sick.

"Don't hurt them," he begins to whisper in a shrill, fingers digging into the fabric of his soaking wet shirt, "Don't hurt them, please. They're—"

“They aren’t your family, Tommy,” Dream interrupts, “They’re villains who kept a secret from you and even tried to *kill* you, don’t you remember? Not that it would’ve worked, as you’re technically already half-dead as it is, but still.”

“*Stop fucking lying!*” Tommy shrieks, covering his ears with the palms of his hands, eyes squeezing shut.

Dream hums, loud enough still for him to hear it even as his ears wince in pain from how hard he’s pressing against them.

“I have been meaning to ask you about something, though,” the man begins, tone calmer than it had been, retaking that tone of borderline intrigue. Tommy’s stomach twirls, fingernails digging into his scalp. “How *was* limbo?”

Silence.

Dream clicks his tongue in disappointment, shrugging.

“Well, I’ll get an answer out of you at some point. It’s only a matter of time before you want something from me, whether that’s to see the sunlight or get a cup of water,” his clothing rustles as he stands, silhouette tall across the floor, like a building (and Tommy’s in the center of his shadow, just like he was before.)

At this, Tommy shrinks back against the wall, swallowing the bile that forms in his throat. There’s a pause, and then the man huffs a laugh, turning on his heel.

He’s about to speak again— Tommy can feel it in the way the air shifts— but it’s interrupted by a loud noise. It’s something that makes Tommy curl in on himself, hands clenched over his ears, desperate to block out the ringing of a cell phone. Beneath it, he hears Dream curse loudly.

“Hello?” The man snaps. He pauses, listening, footsteps echoing against the floor as he paces in the basement. “Well, fucking— have you got Arsonist on it?”

Another pause, and he inhales sharply. Tommy’s jaw has begun to hurt with how hard he’s clenching it.

“Jesus Christ... alright, alright. Fine. I’m on my way there. You fuckin’ tell Cosmos that if this another one of his magic tricks, then he’s off the team. Do you understand?”

Exhaling sharply, Dream hangs up the phone, turning back to face Tommy. If he squints, he’s certain he can see those eyes— black and dull— staring at him, as if looking right into his soul.

“I’ll be gone for a couple hours,” he seethes, “Maybe a day, maybe two. *Whatever*. I’m sure you’ll be fine on your own while I’m dealing with whatever it is Cosmos wants, yeah?”

Tommy doesn’t respond. Dream snorts, turning away from him.

With the toe of his shoe, he squishes the match into the floor. With that, the light goes out, and the room is cascaded into total darkness again.

“Don’t miss your older brother too much,” he teases over his shoulder, heavy shoes clicking against the concrete as he makes his leave.

It’s only once the door closes, heavy and echoing against the empty walls, that Tommy allows himself to breathe again.

(And if flowers infect the inside of his lungs, he chooses to ignore it, just as he always has.)

\*kicks door open\* today's my birthday and i've decided to make it everyone's (butterflies!tommy's) problem!

anywho, i share an almost-birthday with the real life and big man tommyinnit, so every1 direct ur happy bdays to him as well by buying his merch. i couldn't because i am broke however comma.. my Streamer

on that note: uh oh! some things just got revealed and hahahah ohhhh noooo... jester and the blade. this scenario sounds familiar doesn't it? and yes: tommy has been half-dead this whole time! dream did revive him, that was the only part of this that wasn't manipulation/gaslighting. throughout the fic when he feels "cold" or has flashbacks, that's both because of the phantom feeling of limbo & the general consensus that he is, or was, dead.

## IMPORTANT NOTES:

first of all, this chapter was beta'd again by my lovely internet sibling, [crowley galesofsong](#) :D !!! please send aem all your love, they absolutely deserve it after betaing this chap ^\_^ <33

the flowers portion is directly linked to the idea of "greenhouse tommy," which is an absolutely *spectacular* idea created by [star slash lua \(@gardentoms\)](#) on twitter! please give them a follow, they get & deserve all the credit for the idea ^\_^ /gen /nf<3

ALSO WE GOT FUCKIN FANART. ??!?! AGAIN??? OH MY N OF ?!/\$&:!:@:@; IM LOSING MY KIND :(((( MY MIDN IS BEING ???? BLOWN. i'm going to SOB!! everyone go like [strawb \(@strawbbe\)](#) art on twitter :(( follow them!!! i adore their artwork SM !!!! <33 /SO GEN & POS

(real quick: it's a tad confusing what's going on with tommy's cell, but tldr: he's being gaslit. it hasn't *actually* been multiple weeks or days, dream's just manipulating him into thinking that so that he believes nobody's looking for him & that this was the plan all along. dream wants him to feel completely & utterly alone, thus: gaslighting. i hope that clears up the "time jumps" a bit :D)

okay. that is all sorry for the long end note, just some news ^\_^ <33 i hope everyone's doing well hehe & reminder: we r in the final stretch of the fic HEHEH

# you are ever so dear in our hearts because of it!

## Chapter Summary

“You’re the Bard,” Tommy whispers, his eyes searching Wilbur’s own through the darkness.

It’s not a question, but it isn’t quite a statement, either. Somehow, it almost feels like a proclamation.

In another life, maybe it would be a death sentence: the reasoning for execution, as performed in front of a guillotine.

The sight is familiar, déjà vu making a sudden reappearance in Tommy’s chest. He looks away, no matter how much the flickering of firelight makes him want to look back.

“And you’re Theseus,” the man murmurs finally, something coarse in his tone.

or, wilbur finds tommy, techno finally puts some pieces together, & ranboo's having a rough time.

## Chapter Notes

hey guys !! this chapter's a super rough one, please make sure that you read the trigger warnings closely <3 stay safe !

**tws:** mentions of previous abuse, illness & nausea [mild emetophobia warning], light domestic angst, miscommunication, unreliable narrator, graphic violence, blood, weaponry, heavy arguments & gaslighting, descriptions of panic attacks, c!dream-esque dream, & major character death. **please stay safe on this one, kings, it's rough.**

i'll be providing a summary/tldr of the chapter in the comments for anyone that cannot read due to the trigger warnings <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

---

Tommy’s breathing is shallow, scattered like pieces of a puzzle tossed wildly around the floor. His chest feels heavy, weighed down with something similar to content.

Was he finally, after what had to have been weeks, coming to terms with his fate?

It had to be that.

Nothing else could explain the consideration that something was coming, a wary little thing that tugged at his newly awakened instincts and pressed upright against his spine.

If he was to spend every waking moment curved in this position, back to the cell wall and knees pressed to his chest, he figures that maybe they'll all be finally correct; those that muster up sneers and jeer at how he barely reaches Wilbur or Technoblade's shoulders.

They thought he didn't see. He always did.

With ease, Tommy presses his cool hands to his face, hoping to drag some of the heat off of it and into his palms. A fever, most likely, but not one that Dream could help.

If anything, the guy would think that the idea of a moth hybrid having a fever was fascinating. Tommy is nothing if he isn't set up for failure, an experiment in the form of a kid with nothing to gain, and not much left to lose.

The sound of a heavyset door creaking open startles him, wings painfully fluttering behind his back. He should be used to the sound of that door moving now, honestly. It's been long enough, after all.

Tommy swallows the dryness in his throat, fingers digging weakly into his palms, sweaty with a heat that he cannot feel.

Dream hadn't taken that long, which really shouldn't come as a surprise to him. When the man was angry enough about something, he was a driven force; unbeatable, a whirlwind of commotion that could power through a sea of arrows.

There's a few moments of silence before the door shuts behind Dream. Like second nature, the predator moves in, and the prey moves backwards.

Tommy's back hits the cell wall, wings tucking in on themselves.

In the past, Tommy might've used his wings to shield his face and body from the horrors to come. Now, they only serve as a reminder of what happens to those that betray, to those provided a mercy that they do not deserve.

Dream pads down the steps, footfalls lighter than before. Tommy hopes that means that the guy is in a good mood. He should expect him to be, right? If he'd gotten home this quickly, surely that meant he'd defeated... whatever the hell was going on. Surely.

Taking a breath, Tommy levels his head and prepares himself for what comes next.

Then, the sound of something scraping against something else— almost like the hissing that firewood makes when tossed into the flames of a hearth— and a fire ignites.

It's small, a simple match lit aflame, but Tommy's eyes are drawn to it anyways.

Even far away, Tommy can feel the warmth that the fire provides: the comfort that it entails, but shall surely never be harnessed again.

Dream never lit a candle for him, much less a *match*. Hell, he did his best to not let any sort of light come into the room unless it was filtering in from the doorway (although, that felt more like another one of his ways to remind Tommy that this was his punishment more than anything else).

Tommy's eyes move to try and read the dead expression on Dream's mask and his heart all but stops.



There is no green outfit, no porcelain mask boring black eyes into his soul: there is no Dream, who is all burly shoulders and toneless words.

Standing in his place, looking incredibly like a white bishop stood alone in a sea of black, is someone whose name Tommy can't bear to even think.

The man's dressed to the nines, of course, with his classic purple cloak thrown around his shoulders. He even has his mask on, the curvature of a white thing decorated in music notes.

Tommy once spent *hours* staring at all of the Syndicate's different masks as they flashed by on the news, absentmindedly sketching them on loose leaf when he was bored. Now, he sees what those who fear them see. A grotesque shell of a person that could have been, ashes scattered around the front of a hearth).

The sight of the man's face, twisted underneath the mask into something that resembles horror, makes Tommy's mouth fill with acid.

*Oh*, he thinks. *So this is Dream's plan.*

Tommy figures that he has no other choice than to go along with it.

"You're the Bard," Tommy whispers, his eyes searching Wilbur's own through the darkness.

It's not a question, but it isn't quite a statement, either. Somehow, it almost feels like a proclamation. In another life, maybe it would be a death sentence: the reasoning for execution, as performed in front of a guillotine.

(If Tommy hadn't felt sick before, then he does now. The idea of Wilbur dying by his words — hell, *anyone's* words — makes him feel like he's taken another swig of the Healing potion that Dream gave him).

As hard as it is to see, Tommy can make out beady and brown eyes staring back at him from behind a porcelain mask. The firelight from the match reflects back at Tommy, pressed into the depths of eyes hidden behind the carefully crafted mask.

It may be a trick of the light, but something passes in his eyes— dark, but warm, the same way he'd looked at him many months ago when he'd fallen off that ladder in Eldritch Wings.

Really, this is the way Wilbur always looks at him, but now it feels distant. Like the trickling of rainwater in between the cracks of a sidewalk, a distinct divide pulls itself between two once brothers.

A part of Tommy feels like he should've known that this was Wilbur all along. The height, the brown curls that stick out from underneath the purple cloak, falling just barely over one eye... it had been fairly obvious, hadn't it?

Naivety. Another named flaw of his, tucked away in some nonexistent file cabinet pressed and layered at the back of his brain.

Across the room, Wilbur shifts, leaning back onto his haunches.

The sight is familiar, déjà vu making a sudden reappearance in Tommy's chest. He looks away, no matter how much the flickering of firelight makes him want to look back.

"And you're Theseus," the man murmurs finally, something coarse in his tone.

There are signs of anger buried underneath the threads, but Tommy is unsure how much of it is directed at him. Nevertheless, he curls away.

As much as he wishes that this was more of a shock value to him— Wilbur knowing his name, who he once was— nothing close to surprise follows it.

Of course, Wilbur would know; he was involved with Dream, was he not? It was only to be expected that he knew of Tommy's first identity, of the one that should've died on the day that he did.

Even still, the acknowledgement of it, of hearing the name Theseus come out of Wilbur's mouth... it feels, yet again, like a death sentence.

Maybe that's it, then. Dream has kept Tommy alive this long not for experimentation, but so that Wilbur could kill him. If Dream bringing him back again was another piece to the chess set, Tommy wouldn't be too surprised.

That seemed to be the only obvious explanation, wasn't it? The viable lesson, the final piece of the puzzle, chess set, whatever; it was Wilbur Soot, Tommy's pseudo brother in one life, and his executioner in another.

*Two-faced*, a part of him hisses.

*Brother*, the other bargains.

If it had been truly an act— Wilbur's role of the "big brother" figure in Tommy's life— then he had played a good one.

Maybe he *was* an actor of some sort, paid from right off the street as a way to fool Tommy's brain. Not a villain, nothing of the sort; just another puppet whose strings Dream made dance, each one directed to torment *Tommy*.

A true theatre kid, then.

Any other time, any other day, Tommy might have laughed about it. *Theatre kid*. Leave it to Wilbur to be the one attached to the strings of another person's directions, after all.

“If you’re going to kill me, then just get it over with,” Tommy blurts out quietly, forcing his eyes to meet Wilbur’s.

As uncomfortable as it is— and as much as he wishes he could peel them away with the lump forming in his throat— he knows that he shouldn’t look elsewhere.

If he dies here, he wants the last thing he sees is the flickering guilt on Wilbur’s face while he kills him.

Maybe it won’t appear, or maybe it will.

Somehow, the idea of there being nothing but an emotionless expression on Wilbur’s face, eyes as dull as the painted ones on Dream’s mask, makes Tommy look away.

With it, he misses the horror; the way Wilbur’s eyes widen slightly, eyebrows pulling together and shoulders tensing up to his ears.

“What are you talking about?” Wilbur’s tone has tightened, lilting to something high-pitched.

Tommy scoffs, arms tightening around his torso. So this was the game Dream wanted to play. As much as he had been stupid once, Tommy doesn’t intend on repeating his past mistakes.

“Cut the bullshit, Bard,” he hisses through his teeth, teeth clicking when he clenches his jaw. “I know why you’re here. I’m not scared of you. I’ve died before and I can die again. I know that he’ll just—”

He stops, letting the air tense. Did Dream even want anyone other than himself and Tommy to know about the whole revival thing yet?

Even though Tommy’s about to die, he tightens his jaw once more and quiets. Loyal till the end, not quite unlike others.

Still, though, Wilbur knew that he was Theseus, and he'd known that Theseus had died. Maybe the concept of revival wasn't lost to his mind.

He decides not to give him the peace of mind, mouth locked tight.

The air turns bitter cold, the smell of salt slightly overwhelming.

Tommy can't tell if the scent is coming from the blood that still trickles from his nose, from his mouth, or if it's tears. The latter seems less likely, although Tommy isn't sure quite what to think anymore when it comes to Wilbur.

"What?" Wilbur whispers, voice high-pitched and squeaky the way Tommy knows it gets before the man's about to cry.

Tommy wills himself not to immediately look at the man's face, biting down on his tongue harshly. He decides not to grace him with an answer to his question, undoubtedly directed towards the whole *I've died before* thing.

"You're a good actor, you know," Tommy says instead, hoping that the resentment in his tone finds its place in the man's chest. "You *and* your fuckin' family. You all should've been in Hollywood instead of the villain business— maybe then, you could've actually profited from playing a part. Unless you have, I mean, I don't know what Dream did to convince you to get involved and do all this shit, so it *must* be money, right?"

There's a silence, and then Wilbur finally speaks. His voice is heavy, frightened, and confused. (If Tommy didn't know the truth, he probably would've been concerned.)

"What- what the fuck are you talking about?" He questions, blinking wildly in the dark. The match between his pointer and thumb shakes, the flame a wavering light against the man's porcelain mask.

*Breathe*, Tommy reminds himself. He's too weak to get up and try to sock Wilbur in the face through the bars of the cell, to try and break his already-multiple-times-broken nose.

As much as he'd hate to admit it, Tommy is tired.

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about," he bites out, fingernails digging into the fabric of his shirt. Behind him, his wings flutter just barely—the feeling does nothing to lessen the already growing frustration that clusters in his head and chest. Just to release some of the anger, he adds sharply, "I'm not stupid, you know. Not... not anymore, at least."

The pause that follows doesn't last long, interrupted by a sharp intake of breath. Tommy suppresses a flinch, mouth pressing into a thin line.

"Listen to me," Wilbur sounds desperate now. There's the sound of clothes shifting, metal against metal as Wilbur grips onto the iron bars of the cage, one of his rings tapping against it. "Tommy, I have no idea what 'act' you're talking about, but I'm not here to kill you. I would never hurt you. And— what the fuck do you mean, you've '*died before*'? What're you talking about?"

Tommy laughs at this, breathy and heavy with exhaustion. His throat aches from the hoarse bark of laughter he'd let out, the feeling of ants marching up the wall of his esophagus an uncomfortable thing.

Surely, Wilbur knew that he'd died before; this just felt like another part of the bluff. Dream was smart, as much as the fact made Tommy's stomach twist—he'd pull something like this.

So, he ignores the question and redirects his answer.

"You'd never hurt me," Tommy repeats, slowly turning so that he lies directly on his back.

He never could do this when he was younger without a hybrid suppression on. The pain that would emit from his wings being pressed harshly into the linoleum of the training floor, or

even the blankets of his own bed, was always too much to handle.

(Somehow, when nothing comes but a flicker of pain that quickly dissolves into something numb, Tommy figures he would have rather felt the discomfort than nothing at all.)

Tommy's little joke, his *haha, get it?* was not a question, but it must have come out as one, because Wilbur's shoulders tense the way they do before answering something.

"Never. I wouldn't even dream of it," Wilbur claims, his tone sharp and hard, like the blade of a knife. If there's the underlying taste of anxiety, Tommy doesn't hear it, even as he continues to say, "Please, will you just... tell me if you're hurt? I really need to get you out of here, it's not safe with—"

"Are you saying you didn't hurt me when you chased me through the alleyways of Manberg with a gun and intentions to kill?" Tommy interrupts, staring directly up at the ceiling. There isn't much to see except for the bars above, but he pretends that they're constellations.

Wilbur's breath hitches at his words.

A sore subject, clearly.

It should be though, shouldn't it? Tommy's thought it over for however long he's been in here since Dream left, tossing and turning it over in his mind, tumbling like pebbles through the cracks of fingers.

He had a right to be mad. Wilbur had tricked him, just as much as the rest of his family—the *Syndicate*, rather—had. Could he even call them Wilbur's family, or was that just as fake as Wilbur was?

Something sharp digs into Tommy's chest as he realizes something.

If Wilbur's the Bard, then that means... Techno. He had been...

A hand shakily covers his mouth, staunching the bile that rises.

Tommy had practically *put* himself in the line of their sights, hadn't he?

Techno was the Blade, the literal Blood God of Manberg, and Tommy had *saved* him. That's what had sparked the whole "training" thing, what had started his small submergence back into the villain and hero scene.

To think it had been Techno of all people, the man who had caught him from dying off a ladder, the one who had braided his hair and told him stories from old days, who had given him the gentlest of smiles...

Tommy never expected Techno to be an actor, but he was a damn good one.

If this was all fake, that meant Phil was one, too. Eldritch Wings had been a façade, a ruse—he should've known that Phil's gentle invitations to stay at the house were too good to be true.

The red flags should have started and ended on the day that Phil grinned far too kindly at him and even jokingly called him his *son*.

Information; that's all that the Syndicate had ever wanted. Not for the first time, Tommy feels as though he's going to be sick.

"Tommy, I..." Wilbur begins suddenly, his voice strained. Tommy has never heard it this way — anxious tones reside underneath the more concerned ones, realisation pouring into it slowly. "I'm so fucking sorry. I didn't know that it was you, I had no clue. If I had, I never would've gone after you to begin with."



*Right*, Tommy thinks bitterly. *And the emerald that Dream ripped from my neck wasn't a prop.*

As an afterthought, he scoffs, head turning to the side.

“Do you seriously expect me to believe that?” he questions, tone venomous. “Like I said, I’m not *stupid*. I know who you are, I know who the Syndicate is. You don’t let witnesses live, and you certainly don’t like heroes— which, by the way, pretty fucking hypocritical of you to side with Morpheus of all people, isn’t it?”

As much as Tommy has begun to believe the *they’re just paid actors to fuck with your mind* thing, he doesn’t bring that up. If that isn’t actually true, he might die as someone delusional, rather than simply Tommy.

Tommy, not Theseus. Would they set up a second gravestone for him? Maybe Ranboo and Tubbo would attend this time. They seemed to be the only two that were ever real.

Interrupting Tommy’s reverie, Wilbur lets out a shaky breath.

Deep down, a part of Tommy recoils. Even despite everything, he still loved Wilbur— he’s his brother.

*Was* his brother.

The acceptance forces something angry into the pits of his stomach, swirling like dragon fire. It almost resembles the taste of a Healing potion he’d swallowed only minutes— hours, days?— before.

No; an hour, tops.

He shakes the time from his head, returning his attention to the matter at hand. If he stalls his death for as long as possible, maybe he will get the last word this time.

“Morpheus— or Dream, as you probably know him as, too— told me all about your alliance with him, Wilbur,” Tommy spits out, swallowing the saliva that had gathered in his mouth. “Did you know that? He told me everything. All of this was just his plan, right?”

He scoffs, “I might have been naive back then, but I sure as hell aren’t now. I’ve learned, I know better than to trust someone like you.”

*Not that it matters what I’ve learned, he thinks. Nobody bothers you in death, after all.*

On the other side of the bars, Wilbur sucks air in through his teeth.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy can see him press his face into his hands, rubbing at his temples. His hands are shaking, elbows moving with sharp jerks.

“Tommy, I was never in alliance with Morpheus. To even think about being in- in fucking arms with that- *that* fucking prick—” Wilbur says the hero’s name like he’s tasted something sour; putrid. He waves his hand, withdrawing a deep breath, “It disgusts me, especially after seeing what’s happened here, to *you*. Stars, kid, I...”

Carefully, the man looks up, meeting Tommy’s eyes. His own, although gleaming in the small light of the match, are dark.

Wilbur swallows, looking away.

“Morpheus and I are and always have been enemies,” he shakes his head, hair tangling together wildly, “The only time... the only time he was even considered an ally for a *millisecond* was when he saved me from the Banquet, but after what he’s done to you...”

A sharp, needle-like pressure forms in Tommy's chest, almost like the force needed to pop a balloon. With it comes the skepticism, the awfulness of overthinking.

He barely gets the chance to breathe before the pressure pops. When it does, his anger bursts with it.

"Don't lie!" Tommy twists his head in Wilbur's direction, his voice sharper than it was before.

With what little energy he has, he sits up straight, hair falling in heavy waves over his eyes; his limbs are weak, trying to pull his weight back down to the floor. With what little strength he has left, Tommy lifts his chin up slightly, swaying in place.

Shakily, he whispers out, "You're an asshole, you know that, right? I know that you and- and Phil, and Techno- I know that you're all lying, Wilbur. You always have been, haven't you?"

He runs his hands through his hair, pressing his palms into his eyes.

With a defeated breath, he hisses out, "The least you could do for me before I die is not fucking *continue* that lie when I already know what's true and what isn't. At least give me that. I know you and Dream aren't a fan of mercy, but..." his voice breaks a little, "please just give me that."

Opposite to him, Wilbur lets out a pained sound, deep in his throat. Again, Tommy has to push down the reflex to worriedly glance up and make sure the man's alright.

*Executioner*; he reminds himself. *Not family; not anymore.*

His thoughts quiet when Wilbur speaks again, something gentle in his tone. Almost as though it has been congealed with honey and stirred minutely into a cup of steaming tea.

“Tommy, can you look at me, please?”

Hesitantly, Tommy tilts his head in the man’s direction. It’s not quite in a way where he is staring into his eyes. He isn’t sure how he’d react if he had to come face-to-face with him, but he figures he will know soon enough.

Nevertheless, Tommy’s eye catches the golden clasp on Wilbur’s purple cloak and remains there. It’s well made. He expects that Techno was the one to have forged it.

With a slow exhale, Wilbur begins, knuckles white with how tight he’s gripping the cell’s bars.

“This isn’t an act, Tommy,” he begins gently. His words continue before the boy can interrupt him, though, four fingers lifting into the air to subdue him— as if to say “I’m not lying to you, and I never will again, okay? I’m The Bard; a villain from the Syndicate, a... whatever the fuck my hybridity is, I still haven’t quite figured it out, I’m... all of that. Everything you see on television, that is me.”

He breathes, steadily, then continues. “But, I’m also *Wilbur*. I’m still me, kid. Everything I’ve said to you, all the shit I told you about my family and our past— none of it has ever been a lie or a façade written by Dream.”

Tommy goes to speak, but Wilbur shifts uncomfortably, forcing him to quiet.

“Tommy, listen— you are like a brother to me,” There’s a pause here, a gentle moment where Tommy feels himself lingering onto every word. The past tense connotation that Tommy had thought of earlier fizzles out on his tongue.

Nothing is spoken, not a sound made until Wilbur allows himself to continue.

He meets Tommy’s eyes as he corrects himself, shoulders curling upwards, “No, fuck it. I’ve said it before, and I’ll reiterate it again: you *are* a brother to me. You’re a part of my family,

not just to me, but to all of us. Phil and Techno, me, my mother; we love you, Tommy. I don't care if you're Theseus..."

Wilbur waves his hand here, huffing, "Hell, I could've cared less if you were *Mimic*. I don't care, Tommy, and neither will they, because you're one of my *best friends*. I don't want to lose you, and neither do they."

There's a third pause, this one exceedingly longer than the last. It's here when Wilbur brushes the hair from his eyes, finally facing away from Tommy.

"That doesn't mean I'm not prepared for you to leave, though," he mutters truthfully, leaning the side of his forehead against the metal bars. "I know how I am, how Techno is, how Phil is. If you want to leave, know that we aren't going to force you to stay, alright? This isn't a way for me to guilt you, or manipulate you; none of that. We just want you to be happy."

With this, Wilbur turns to give the kid a slight smile, "Okay?"

Something heavy gathers in Tommy's throat, a lump settled higher than it was before. He can't let himself cry; breaking down just before he dies is something he promised himself would never happen again.

Fear is his hubris, just as much as trust could be Theseus's. Somehow, the two have seeped together between the seams of identity, and in a clasp of paints being molded together, Tommy feels both all at once.

"You're lying," Tommy whispers, his tone broken and cracking, as if he's speaking over the receiver of an old phone. A part of him knows that Wilbur's not, that there is nothing but honesty dripping from his words, but he ignores it. "You— you're all lying. You can't love me, I don't..."

The words *I don't deserve it* go unspoken, but Wilbur's expression falls as though he'd heard them.

Slowly, he lets go of the bars, reaching a hand through the cracks of the cell. Just barely in the candlelight, Tommy can see the iconic fingerless gloves and the stains of black soot that are caked under Wilbur's fingernails.

He's always wondered what that was from, but the apathy he felt towards villains—the disgust, rather, and the desire to stay far away—never let him get close enough to find out.

“Come here, Tommy,” Wilbur murmurs, tone almost like a plea. “I won't hurt you, I promise. We can swear like we did before I left, remember? I told you that I'd return, and I didn't lie. I was there, and I can be there again. You just have to trust me, kiddo.”

To prove his point, Wilbur gently raises his pinky in the air, a small smile tugging at his lips. It's sad, but slightly reassuring.

“You're safe, okay?” he reiterates, a hand coming up to take off his mask. It clinks as it rests against the cement floor, revealing the ashen face of his former brother. “Look, it's just me now. No Bard; just me.”

Tommy hesitates.

It could be a trap, couldn't it? A way for Dream to say his last hurrah. He could almost hear him laughing, words laced with a sneer; *I brought Wilbur back in, and you trusted him again. See what I told you, Theseus? Your Lycomedes was never me; it was your trusting nature.*

In truth, Dream was right. Tommy knew that he was, but what did it matter, now? If he dies here, at least he could smile with bloody teeth and whisper a quiet “*I told you so*” up at his former brother.

Maybe then, he'd see a form of empathy.

Even if he doesn't, it's a step that he's willing to take.

With a shaking exhale, Tommy moves forwards, practically on his hands and knees as he does. The length of the cell isn't long, and he's far too tired to stand.

Once he reaches Wilbur, he finally is able to get a good look at the man. Up close, it's all the more obvious to see how distressed he is.

Underneath Wilbur's eyes clings a dark shadow that isn't just eyeshadow; in between his eyebrows has formed a line, as though he's been frowning for a long time. It's almost funny, in a way, how different and yet unchanged he looks.

Once upon a time, Tommy knew him as two halves; one, the Bard who had been his death, and Wilbur who had been his beginning.

Now, the two are one in the same.

(A part of him finds it amusing; the metaphor of Wilbur's villain mask, a porcelain drama mask composed of black musical notes and a duotone feature. Two different sides that had been in front of him this whole time, hovering just beneath his reach).

Carefully, Tommy reaches between the bars of the cell and takes Wilbur's pinky with his. It's not much, but the man smiles anyway, gently squeezing their fingers together.

"Thank you," Wilbur whispers, lingering for a moment before he drops his hand. He blinks, looking over Tommy's face in the candlelight, before tilting his head a little. "Can I... look you over for a minute?"

There's a long pause as Tommy sits here, allowing Wilbur to check him over worriedly. It's undoubtedly that he's seeing the blood that has long since dried on Tommy's knuckles, or the way his hair hangs around his face.

Something dark passes behind them, sharp and fiery— for a moment, Tommy thinks that he may have been right all along, until Wilbur’s eyes meet his once more.

The fire is gone, replaced with cold and biting surprise congealed with concern.

“Tommy,” Wilbur begins slowly, his tone matching the look in his eyes. He grips the iron bars of the cage tighter, head tilting in awe, “Since when have you had wings?”

Tommy’s been cold for years, but somehow he feels as if he’s been doused in a bucket of ice water all over again.

Behind him, his wings twitch dully; a painfully numb reminder that they were no longer useful, just a decor— a helpless limb.

“I…” he begins, tone choked. He lets his head drop a little, curling in on himself.

If he was about to die, then he might as well speak about it, right? What did it matter if Wilbur and the rest of the Syndicate eventually knew of one of his deepest secrets? They already knew that he was Theseus— now, they can know something else.

Blinking past his incredulity, Tommy clears his throat. No use covering it up.

“I *used* to have wings,” he corrects, tasting metallic in his mouth when he clenches his jaw. “I don’t… anymore, if you uh- catch my drift.”

Wilbur hums, a hand coming through the bars once more, palm face up. Reluctantly, Tommy takes it, earning a gentle squeeze.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers, “I don’t know what it’s like to lose that sort of thing. To lose your ability to be free, to fly, but… Phil— Archangel, I suppose— has told me before what it



feels like. Being grounded isn't easy, and if you ever wanted to... speak to anyone, I just want you to know he's always available."

A smile enters Wilbur's tone, "He'd love to help you, kid. In any way he can."

Tommy laughs wetly, bringing his free hand up to wipe his nose. Although he's been alright at holding the tears back, his nose still runs, something he finds pretty embarrassing.

"It's fine," he responds, giving Wilbur a wry smile. "I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't have to be," Wilbur responds, giving him another small squeeze.

They stay like that for a few moments, only ruined when Wilbur clears his throat, back straightening.

"You've been in there far too long, I think," he comments. "Do you know if there's a key somewhere that locked it, or if it's just...?"

"I think there's a key somewhere," Tommy admits, looking up at where the cell door is located. He can remember the three times it's been opened, he'd heard the jostling of a lock and a click, almost like a key was being inserted somewhere.

Another squeeze of his hand— encouragement.

"Do you know where it could be?" Wilbur asks, already glancing over his shoulders.

Tommy shakes his head, fingernails digging into the back of Wilbur's knuckles. Silently, he apologises, but it doesn't seem as though the man minds.

“I can break it open then, how’s that sound?” Wilbur questions, already squeezing the bars tighter between his hands. “It might take a moment, but it’s possible that I’d be able to if I tried. Would you be alright with that?”

Glancing towards the doorway, Tommy hesitantly nods.

Wilbur’s smile is much warmer in the candlelight.

“Okay. As much as it sucks, I’ll have to let go of your hand, Toms,” he waves their intertwined hand in the air a tad for emphasis. Just as reluctantly, Tommy lets go, pulling his arm back and wrapping it around his midsection.

With his other hand freed, Wilbur clutches the bars of the door again, hoisting himself upwards. Any other time, Tommy might have laughed at how difficult it’d been for him to get up. Maybe he’d have made a passing comment about how old he’s gotten or something.

Now, though, he can’t find the words to joke.

“It’ll be quick?” Tommy mutters instead, eyes trained on the glistening of Wilbur’s boots. They’re high-rise heels, which explains how much taller he appears to be; or, maybe, that’s just his hybridity.

(The Bard was one of the few people in the villain and hero society that Tommy hasn’t quite figured out yet. Not for the first time, he wished that he’d remained oblivious).

“I promise,” Wilbur reassures, speaking those two words for what must be the second time today. “Now move back a little. This might be loud.”

Tommy obliges, pressing his back against the cold wall on the opposite side of the cell again. As more of a last second decision, he presses his palms to his ears and closes his eyes.

The loud bang— quickly followed by multiple little plings as bars fly in opposite directions — is loud enough to hear even when trying to muffle it.

Tommy recoils at the sound, lowering his head into his knees. Before he has the chance to look up and assess the damage, there's a hand pressing against the crown of his head. Unlike Dream's, this one is gentle. Caring.

Slowly, Tommy raises his head, meeting Wilbur's eyes. The man's gazing at him kindly, eyebrows still raised slightly with worry.

Up close, Tommy can see the man that he knows far too well as his brother. The traces of sleep congealed with dark eyeshadow just underneath his eyes, smile lines pressed like linen into his cheeks, and the freckles that so closely resemble Tommy's own; something that had once or twice become a passing bit between the rest of Wilbur's (and his) family.

Somehow, it feels like the bars of the cell themselves had clouded his sight, transforming a brother into something bitter. Or, perhaps, that's just how it was, and how it will remain.

"Hey, Tommy," Wilbur breathes, one of his hands fluttering around the boy's hair. Not quite touching, but close, as if wanting to run his hand through it. Airily, he avoids the antennae, sending them a strange look. (Not one of disgust, but of fascination).

"Hey, Wilbur," Tommy responds, watching Wilbur go through his heavy thought process. In reality, Tommy shouldn't hug him— he shouldn't let Wilbur be in here at all, and he certainly shouldn't consider him a best friend, much less a brother.

He never was the best at self preservation, though.

With a moment's reluctance beforehand, Tommy leans forwards, pressing all of his weight into Wilbur's arms. Just as he had done, there's only a second of hesitation before Wilbur's wrapping Tommy up in his arms as well, chin resting atop his head.

The feeling is familiar, the type of nostalgia that Tommy wished he had more of.

In this moment, Wilbur isn't the Bard— he isn't the meticulous strategies of destroying those that get in his way, or the deep timber laughter designed to send everyone running into the nearest shelter.

Rather, he is *Wilbur*.

He is the tired-looking man that visits Tommy in the coffee shop and only orders a black macchiato. He's the one that wears dark clothing and broods, a presence that always somehow makes Tommy snort.

Wilbur is high-pitched laughter and hands digging through the mud of that old pond Tommy loves, a grin plastered into his face while he presents the wildlife he'd found. The Bard is sneering and cold, bitter tones that echo against the empty walls of an unending train station.

Somehow, they're one in the same— but for now, Wilbur is simply Wilbur.

"I've got you, Tommy," the man whispers now overhead, rubbing a hand up and down Tommy's back. The boy melts into the touch immediately, face pressed into his neck. "I'll protect you. Nobody can hurt you— or will hurt you— again. Not while I'm breathing, not while Techno or Phil are breathing, either. We're your family, and we always will be."

Tommy, even though his stomach still moves with a great unease, believes him.

---

Ranboo's been on edge before, but this is different. Instead of being surrounded by friends (and *only* friends), he's being put into a spotlight.

It's not pointed directly at him, but with every passing glance in his direction, he knows the question that boils on everyone's tongue.

*Pick a side*, he can already hear coming from Sam's mouth. The man was comforting, an idol figure that Ranboo had as a child; but he also happened to be one who chose sides. Sam never liked to remain directly in the middle, one foot on both ends of the line.

Tubbo, of course, knows how Ranboo is. He'd hope so, after how many years they'd been roommates, a platonic marriage settled between the two of them for the tax write-off.

Although it's clear that Tubbo doesn't quite approve of Ranboo's ambiguity, he doesn't argue with them over it.

There was one instance where he'd mentioned that it's unhealthy to remain directly planted in the middle, one foot on the left side and the other on the right, but Ranboo has always disagreed.

*"What good does it do to be on one side, anyways?"* he'd asked, mouth pressed into a line. *"I mean, isn't— isn't there always supposed to be someone regulating debates, a 'neutral party?' Why can't that be me, in this instance?"*

Tubbo had just shrugged, shooting him a weak smile. There was no answer to the question, no explanation. They didn't really speak of it again afterwards.

Another look is thrown Ranboo's way, this time by Niki instead.

It's not one of scrutiny, but rather worry; Ranboo pushes down the question that bubbles in his throat, the loud exclamation of *What?* that he so desperately wants to ask whenever someone stares at him for just a *little* too long.

He's always liked Niki. The possibility of ruining the friendship that they have with an outburst fills him with discomfort.

Quickly turning away, Ranboo taps their forefinger against their kneecap.

One thing they've always been good at during these situations— and something that they've learned through sessions with a therapist— is the strange term called *people watching*.

Tommy always found it absolutely hilarious when Ranboo brought the topic up, snorting into his second mug of hot chocolate.

Really, though, it's probably amongst the many other reasons why Ranboo enjoys being a vigilante so much; watching and understanding people was something he'd always taken pride in.

(Why he hadn't understood who Tommy was earlier, much less what he was going through, will always be something that wrangles him with guilt. He'd known that Tommy wasn't okay, that much had always been obvious; but had he even *done* anything about it?)

Pushing the thoughts away, Ranboo looks around, shifting his weight against the cushions.

He's still sat in the same exact spot that he'd claimed upon walking into the Craft's home, uncomfortable with the way he sits. (Originally, he hadn't intended on staying for long).

On the other side of the room, Phil's standing with Sam, quietly conversing over something. The two have been butting heads far more than Ranboo expected— well, maybe not, actually.

They were pretty much mortal enemies when Sam was still in the line of duty as a hero, but this feels far more personal than anything.

(Ranboo just hopes it's not yet another thing that they have to pick and choose sides on at some point).

Not too far from them, Charlie is conversing with Jester— or, well, as he'd called him, *Quackity*.

The two of them are hunched over the map of Manberg, Jester's eyebrows furrowed as he presses his thumb against every line. Beside him, Charlie's bouncing up and down eagerly. Just behind them are the two people that Jester had brought with him.

Ranboo recognizes them immediately as the butlers from the Banquet. He decides that now is not a good time to bring that up, even if he's almost one-hundred percent certain that Phil knows exactly who they are, too.

An elbow juts into his side lightly, jostling him from his thoughts.

He turns his head, shooting Tubbo a slightly fearful look, which is returned with a raised eyebrow. Tubbo's arms are crossed comfortably over his chest, entire weight leaning back against the cushions of the sofa, as though he's right at home.

Ranboo never would understand how he acts this well in these sorts of situations.

"Are you okay?" Tubbo questions, tilting his head a little to get a better read of Ranboo's facial expressions. "If you want, I can make you another brove."

Ranboo's nose wrinkles in disgust instantly. "Don't call it that, please."

A grin crosses Tubbo's face, as wide as it can go in the situation that they're in.

"It's true though, isn't it?" His friend questions, taking on his classic *'I'm completely innocent'* tone.

Rubbing a hand down the side of his face, Ranboo shakes his head. The last thing that he wanted to argue over was the title of Tubbo's totally-original (and definitely not invented

over a hundred years ago) creation of toast cooked on the stove rather than a toaster.

The very thing a toaster was created for, but whatever.

He finds that he can't help himself from asking for once, though.

The absence of Tommy has made him feel slightly bolder, if that was the right terminology. Not that Tommy going missing was the catalyst to Ranboo's confidence boost or anything, though. (That would be awful, but thinking about it is slightly funny. He makes a mental note to bring it up with Tommy when they find him).

"Wouldn't the actual acronym for it be 'trove,' though?" Ranboo leans his neck back against the sofa, rubbing the space between his eyes with his thumb and pointer finger. "It's not like it's bread, I mean- it *is*, but it's been toasted, so that makes it toast—"

"Brove," Tubbo restates, nodding his head. "I won't hear otherwise."

Despite himself, Ranboo purses his lips, containing a laugh.

The feeling quickly dissipates when he glances away from Tubbo again, catching sight of Jester rising from the floor. There's a look of something strange on his face—horror, fear? Maybe both— as he crosses the room.

Jester's hand barely touches Phil or Sam's arms when they both whip around to face them.

Ironically, the common ground between the two of them has been found: a mutual dislike of the only guy in the room that seems to be dressed to attend a meeting in a casino or something.

Ranboo finds that he can't quite disagree with their discomfort with Jester.



Subtly, he tilts his head in their direction, trying to pick up on what they're discussing. The fire crackling and the buzzing of conversation (quiet, but still comprehensible) coming from Niki and Jack doesn't do much to help.

"Quackity's going to revisit a place he thinks Tommy might've gone," Charlie announces from right behind Ranboo, making him flinch so hard his knee hits the underside of Phil's glass coffee table.

Hissing out a wince, Ranboo turns his head to shoot Charlie a glare, "Jesus Christ, did you really have to sneak up on me like that?"

The man smiles sheepishly, "Sorry. I just saw you looking at them, so I figured I'd tell you so that Quackity doesn't beat you up for eavesdropping."

Ranboo huffs, blowing fringe from his eyes. Quackity seemed strong, both physically and (*horrifically*) mentally. That didn't mean that he could take Ranboo in a fight, though. Honestly, they'd like to see him try while he's in *this* state of mind.

As if reading their mind, Charlie hums nervously, "Please don't fight my boss," the look on Ranboo's face must say something, because he quickly adds, "*Yet*, at least. He's very worried about Tommy, so I don't think that he would do as well."

"No promises," Tubbo pipes up, bumping his head into Ranboo's shoulder and grinning wildly at Charlie.

Ranboo holds himself back from intervening; as much as he was just as suspicious about Charlie as the rest of everyone was, there was something about him that just felt weirdly trustworthy.

Maybe it was the fact he reminded Ranboo of Tommy, or maybe it was the fact that he seemed to know everything about everyone that got to him; although, he isn't too sure how that would make him exactly *trustworthy*, so much as it would be a *threat*.

If Tommy was friends with him, though, he and Tubbo are going to have to swallow what anger they have. Not for Charlie's sake, but for their best friend's.

Before Charlie can think of another excuse to give in Jester's stead, Phil clears his throat loudly, redirecting everyone's attention to the fireplace.

The man's stood in between Jester and Sam, looking mildly uncomfortable. It's not the type of uncomfot that Ranboo feels, but rather a type that is seemingly formed while suppressing an urge.

*He wants to kill him so bad*, Ranboo thinks, unsure whether to laugh or scoot away.

"Jester believes that he's found a place where Tommy may be," Phil announces, deliberately averting his eyes from meeting Jester's. He shifts from foot to foot with uncertainty, clearly hating the very words on his tongue. "He, Charlie, Sam and I are all going to check it out, see if he's there. Meanwhile, I want everyone here to formulate a strategy on what to do when we see whoever has him—"

As to be expected, there's an immediate uproar.

As though they're all on the same mindframe, everyone— minus those who had come with Jester— stand in perfect unison, Ranboo included.

Niki and Jack's faces are twisted in anger, the two of them already going off over one another about how stupid that idea was. Here is where Ranboo would typically force his mouth shut, unable to pick sides: but to his surprise, he can't find himself disagreeing.

"Are you seriously going to go with this guy?" Niki hisses between her teeth, motioning dramatically towards Jester. The man seems pretty unfazed by the clear venom in her words. He must get this a lot. "I mean, hell, Phil, W— *Bard* almost *killed* him. Can you actually trust the words from the mouth of someone that is archenemies with your son?"

It's a fair point, Ranboo thinks, head turning to face Phil.

The man's expression is pretty much unreadable. He distantly applauds him for being able to maintain his cool, stoic physique. If Ranboo were in his position, he figures that he would've lost it long before now.

"You're right, I can't trust him," Phil admits slowly, and every word that Ranboo had formed on his tongue dies with his exhale. "But right now, with everything that's going on, I don't really have much else of a choice. There's only one thing on my mind and that's finding my son."

To his right, Ranboo can feel Tubbo tense a little.

"If I have to go to great lengths to do so, including an allyship with someone who has opposed me and my family in the past," Phil eyes Jester for a moment here, then looks back at Niki and Jack. "Then so be it."

Silence falls, a short thing that strings itself across the floor.

Slowly, those who stood awkwardly take their seats once more. Ranboo wishes that he could bury himself in the sofa cushions. This is why he doesn't get involved.

"Right then," Phil clears his throat, walking forwards. He pauses at the coffee table, bending down to press his fingertip against a particular space on it. "If we don't get back in time, or if something happens that requires immediate safety, head here. Purpled and Hannah"—Phil motions with his hand towards the two that had come with Jester—"Will guide you to Las Nevadas."

He stands once more, taking his place back in between Jester and Sam.

Ranboo finds it slightly amusing to see the three of them standing together in one place. A retired hero, a villain, and a villain's martyr; what a great team they make, really.

"As for what you all can do in the meantime," Phil glances at Tubbo and Ranboo when he says this, "I recommend looking at other places on your maps for where he could be. As tedious as it sounds, that's really all that we can do for now. Retrace your steps, his steps, all of it."

Phil takes a breath, twisting the golden wedding band around his finger.

The next sentence comes with far more hesitation, care woven into each word.

"If a woman happens to come by while I'm gone asking for me, ask her where she was on the day that Troy fell. If she responds with anything other than '*Right there with you,*' don't let her in." Phil pauses to look up, jaw set tight. "Understood?"

"Who is she?" Jack questions abruptly, elbows settled on his knees. The angry expression that had settled on his face only moments before slips away in the blink of an eye; Ranboo finds himself envying him. "Have you got a wife, Phil?"

The corner of Phil's mouth tugs a little. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it type of situation.

"I do, actually," he confirms, making Jack blink. "She's a great woman, don't worry. Just make sure that you do let her inside if she answers correctly— I really doubt that I'll want to be scraping your ashes off of the floor when I get home."

Jack tenses a little, making the wise decision to stay quiet for once.

"On that note, then," Jester takes the reins of the conversation, hands pressing together. "We're leaving. Charlie, get the car ready, please."

The slime hybrid breaks into a big smile, a hand raising in a salute, “Of course, Quackity.”

Charlie runs off without so much as a goodbye, leaving Ranboo staring at the space he’d been sitting in. He really does remind him a lot of Tommy.

From another life, perhaps the two would be brothers of a sort. (And maybe in another life, Tommy would be just as optimistic as Charlie is).

“So, wait. Are you guys *certain* that it’s someone who’s got him, and not just that he’s run off on his own accord?” One of the people dressed in a purple pressed suit questions suddenly, looking particularly comfortable with their leg tossed over the other.

The small group that had been ready to leave pauses for a moment (minus Sam, who strides right past everyone and out the front door).

Ranboo resists the urge to tell them to shut up. He knows that it’d only be bad if he did. In truth, they had no idea if Tommy was even taken in the first place— all they knew is that he’s gone, it’s his birthday, and there wasn’t a note.

Every sign points to abduction, but Ranboo’s still not one hundred percent sure.

Tommy spoke about leaving Manberg sometimes; nothing that implied he completely wanted to (especially after meeting the Crafts), but more so that he was ready to.

To Ranboo, it sounded more like a fight-or-flight response. If there was danger, Tommy was ready to flee at any given moment.

He’d promised, though, that he’d never leave without bringing them with him. It was sort of like a code to them, really, a simple promise passed around as though it were a secret: “*If I go, you two are going with me.*”

Tubbo had grinned, tossing an arm around their friend's shoulders, "*As if you're going anywhere without us, big man.*"

When Tommy's eyes had turned to Ranboo, they'd just laughed nervously, making a comment similar to, "*I mean, who else would you let dye your hair for you?*"

Everything about this felt wrong. Unplanned.

The last thing that Tommy ever happened to be was just that: unplanned. Ranboo worried sometimes that the kid had everything worked out, only to be disturbingly surprised a day after when Tommy would suggest something out of nowhere.

(Once, Tommy had Ranboo dye the tips of his hair blue instead of red. It would've been awful trying to get out later on to re-dye with red if it weren't for Tommy's strange genetics, honestly.

It's nice to know he's not the only one with natural white hair, though).

"We're certain," Jester confirms aloud, giving the lounging kid a look that makes them shrink back a fraction. "While we're gone, will you and Hannah show the rest of the people here the direction to Las Nevadas in case that emergency *does* arise? It would be better if it wasn't just you two that knew the precise location."

"Why can't we just come back here?" Niki pipes up, a frown resting on her features. She must've been thinking that earlier but just didn't want to interrupt Phil. Ranboo doesn't blame her: he'd interrupt Jester, too.

Although, he figures that if there was anyone that hated Jester more than the rest of the people in the room, it would probably be Niki. Ranboo didn't know the full story, but he figures that the whole *Wilbur and Jester nearly killing one another* and being classified as arch nemeses was enough explanation.

Jester gives Niki a wry smile, pressing his hands together.

“If the person who has Tommy is who I think he is, then he’ll know this place. The Tower has most of the records pertaining to villains, even if they’d like said villains to think that they don’t.”

Phil shuffles his feet a bit at this, eyes clouded with thought. Ranboo internally winces for him. It must be hard realizing that a spot you’d deemed as safe has never once been in the first place.

He’d know the feeling, he realizes, with a worried glance towards Tubbo.

To his surprise, though, his friend looks eager to speak, elbows positioned on his knees and eyebrows raised in thought. When he looks like this, Ranboo recalls, there’s

“Then how don’t they know Las Nevadas?” Tubbo questions, the bite in his tone causing Ranboo to flinch a fraction. He waves his hand to the right, eyebrows raising, “You said that they know every villain’s place, even if they think that they don’t. How would you know that they haven’t got yours on surveillance like everyone else’s?”

The smile on Jester’s face grows sickeningly, curving up his cheeks.

“I just know,” he responds calmly. If his eyes flicker to where Charlie’s sat on the sofa, nobody mentions it. “So- are there any other stupid ass questions, or are we going to waste more time that could’ve been used finding Tommy?”

Nobody responds.

Jester claps his hands together, snapping Sam back to reality.

“Great,” his tone says otherwise. “Phil, I’ll be in the car. If you and Sam aren’t out there in three minutes, I’m leaving without you.”

To add onto his point, he taps his elegant watch, “I’ll be timing you.”

Ranboo frowns, eyes catching on the villain’s watch. Is that really forged with real gold?

He’d been certain that Tommy had made a whole point in saying that he and Quackity were beyond poor when they’d lived together. According to him, the only thing that really kept them afloat was Quackity’s internship with the president of the city (which intrigued Ranboo a lot, but Tommy never liked to elaborate).

No— they shake their head, dismissing the thought. No distractions, not now.

As though reading their mind, Tubbo’s hand encloses over theirs once more. *A silent I’m here, it’ll be okay. We’ll find him.*

Ranboo squeezes his friend’s hand, his free one tapping the beat to Tommy’s favourite song on his kneecap.

*We’ll find him.*

—

Techno moves through the streets fluidly.

There is no second-guessing, no glances down at his phone for directions: he’d been to his destination enough times to know its exact location.



It takes no less than five minutes for him to reach it.

The lone grave, shrouded in decaying flowers and sticky snow, stares back at him. This sight, this feeling; everything about it is far too familiar. Deja vu prickles up his neck, an old conversation resurfacing at the back of his mind as he bends down before the grave.

*“Do you ever think about... them?”*

*“About who, Wil?”*

*“You know exactly who I’m referring to.”*

*Techno had exhaled a little, opening the novel in his hands again, forcibly trying to escape this conversation topic as best as he could.*

*“Not really, no,” Techno admitted, even though it’s only partially a lie.*

The truth was— and still is— that Techno thinks about Theseus frequently.

The former hero had been served a platter of injustice, cold and prepared with an unfortunate death that arrived far too soon.

It didn’t take an idiot to look at the former hero and see that they had been nothing but a child. Not in a patronising way, though. Techno never had been against Theseus, especially not when he’d taken one look at the scrawny kid in a matching costume to Morpheus’ and decided he was far too young for this.

That being said, Techno could tell that Theseus was a good fighter. He’d never had the chance to fight him himself— something that he deliberately avoided with the rest of his family— but he’d seen it.

Hell, he'd heard enough shittalk from Skeppy before the guy had gone MIA (who, apparently, Theseus had bested in the field once) to know that the kid was unlike anything he'd ever seen.

Although he wasn't quite to Morpheus's level yet, he would get there as he grew older. The taught always becomes the teacher, after all.

In a way, Techno was reminded of himself every time he watched another story appear on the news about the mysterious death of Theseus.

*"Was he depressed and fell out of his own accord, or had something else happened?"* The newscasters would question, raising their eyebrows for dramatic effect.

It was all so *irritating* to Techno how they'd taken the death of one of their top heroes and spun it into just another profitable story. Nothing, though, could've prepared him for the bitterness he'd felt when the story fell completely flat just a week later.

There was barely any closure to the supposed accident or otherwise, either; nothing about it was confirmed or denied by the higher-ups. Even Morpheus, who had been the hero's trainer and mentor before he'd died, had always seemed so calm about it all during interviews.

It wasn't hard to see how quick the top hero of Manberg was to put on a teary-eyed voice and act like he gave more than two shits about what had happened to his former apprentice. He was also just as quick to deny he'd known anything about Theseus's mental state or otherwise.

*"I didn't even know what was going on,"* Morpheus had claimed at one particular interview that's burned into Techno's mind. *"He was always so... energetic and happy. I guess that not everyone is as they seem, though. I mean, there were times where I thought that maybe something was going on, but... I guess it'll just remain a mystery."*

*Pretentious bastard,* was the first thing that came to Techno's mind, eyes narrowing at his television screen. *Liar, liar, liar.*

Despite the very few theories that Techno had on how Theseus had died, the story died with the hero, and the only thing that remains now is what little footage is recorded on old news stories and Theseus's own gravestone.

Maybe the reason why Techno visits Theseus' grave is because he feels a strange connection to him, maybe even pity; or perhaps, he's simply given a reason for his madness.

Either way, there was something in the former hero that he had seen other than the metaphorical mirror image of himself— it was something that even *Wilbur* had come to notice.

His brother never did like to concern himself with the politics of the hero versus villains world (unless it came to where he and the rest of his family stood), but he matched Techno's worries about the story of Theseus.

(Phil was rather indifferent about the situation. If they brought it up, he'd quickly change the subject, declaring that he wanted nothing more than to just drag Theseus out of the binds that held him. Like the rest of the family, Phil could easily tell how young Theseus was).

Now, Techno brushes his fingers against the stone.

Wilbur had come here for a reason, surely.

It couldn't have been a spur of a moment type thing.

Techno knew Wilbur better than to consider he'd stop for coffee in the midst of looking for Tommy, much less to pay respects to a hero that he hadn't even known.

When Techno begins to feel the snow sink into his dress pants, he breathes, and closes his eyes.

The act of retracing his brother's steps would be fairly easy if he wasn't so stressed out. At first, he'd been only looking for one brother, and now here he was, trying to find two. Gods, he should've known that if either Wilbur or Tommy go missing, then the other will disappear somehow as well.

Techno couldn't say that he wouldn't do the same, though, with an acknowledgment of the snowflakes gathered into his hair. He'd run to the ends of the Earth to find his brothers, dragging Phil right behind him.

He inches forwards, closer to the gravestone, and then freezes. Something's in the air, not exactly close, but nearby; bitter and salty, like someone's begun to bleed.

For a moment, it's unrecognizable— too far away for him to pinpoint— and then it grows closer.

Techno's stomach twists at the familiarity, feet working on their own. He pushes away from the gravestone, realization sinking in that's far colder than the snow could ever be. Like a prayer, Techno draws his blade.

—

Time, for Tommy, has slowed to a halt.

For however long he's been stuck in this cell, waiting the days out until Dream finally kills him, he's felt as if time has gone quicker than it should be.

One moment, he'd eat breakfast, and two hours later, he'd have dinner; each meal was always the same, but Dream would always greet him with a Good morning and a Good evening when delivering them.

In this moment, though, everything moves as if encased in a jar of honey.

Tommy's nose presses into the front of Wilbur's sweater, taking in breaths of cinnamon and ash (the fabric of which, characteristically, has become soaking wet. He chooses to ignore the fact of how that had occurred. In another life that he isn't a dead man walking, he'd joke that Wilbur had drooled on himself or something).

The man that Tommy has considered many things (each of which, ironically, had been all at once as of ten minutes ago), cradles him close.

A hand runs up the back of his curls, plaiting the oily ones into place. Wilbur's voice is a steady anchor, quietly whispering reassurances into his ear.

Tommy knows that they should leave— that Dream could return anytime now— but he can't find the motivation to move. If it were his choice, he'd stay right here forever, wrapped in his older brother's arms (and Gods, that was still so confusing).

"You're alright now," Wilbur's still whispering the same ode into Tommy's curls, arms wound around him like a tight (but not quite uncomfortable) vice. "I'm not gonna leave you, you're okay- you're alright, kiddo. He's never going to hurt you again, I promise."

Tommy refuses to cry a second time, but he figures he may be close if Wilbur doesn't stop with the reassurances.

They're nice to hear, something that he's been dreaming of hearing in the passing chances he's had to actually sleep in this cage, but they bring a swirling storm of emotions that Tommy can't name.

*Forgiveness*, he thinks, might be one of them, nestled right beside *brotherhood* and the remaining undertones of anger.

"Stop- stop sayin' that shit," he whispers, voice crackling with mirth. He clears his throat, pulling out of Wilbur's hug, even though everything in his mind screams to return to his brother's warmth. "It's awful and cheesy. Just ten minutes ago we were at one another's throats, you know, and now you're..."

Tommy blinks, registering the warm smile on Wilbur's face. God, that's strange. How can he be smiling while they're in this situation?

Only ten minutes ago, Tommy had been screaming at him for being... well, what he'd thought was a traitor. Not quite *traitor* as he was slightly influenced by his own form of belief system (the trials and tribulations of being a villain, Tommy thinks bitterly).

Wilbur had apologised, he'd explained himself, had told him that Dream was basically lying (what else was new?) and here they were, wrapped in one another's arms. Two brothers and a miscommunication— hopefully— resolved.

Hopefully, Tommy thinks, narrowing his eyes up at the man.

"Why are you smiling?" He blurts out, unable to contain the words.

"Because it's nice to see you breathing and not just from the other side of a cell wall," Wilbur admits, his tone soft. He reaches out, brushing the front of Tommy's curls back. "I was worried about you."

Tommy's nose wrinkles, "What'd I say about being cheesy after our spat?"

"And what did I say about us being brothers?" Wilbur quips, making something warm return in the base of Tommy's chest. The man leans forwards, pressing their foreheads together, "I know I said that we'd always be a family, Tommy, but—"

A bated breath, and then a sigh.

Tommy's throat tightens. Uh, oh; here's where Wilbur confirms Dream's consistent theory and goes back on his word.

*His pinky's going to fall off*, a voice reminds Tommy jokingly. He pushes the thought away, no matter how funny the idea of Wilbur's finger falling off for breaking a pinky promise is.

"Look, I fucked up," the man begins, which is not at all what Tommy had been expecting. He'd been sure that the words 'fucked up' would have been directed at him, actually. "I fucked up real bad, Toms. I'm so, so sorry. If I could, I'd take it all back. The train station, the- Jesus, the everything, so long as you were alright. I know that Techno and Phil would do the same, too."

Wilbur pauses here, allowing Tommy a few moments for his words to sink in.

"However," he continues, swallowing, "No matter how many times I apologise, no matter how many times I reiterate that we're family, that does not mean I'm looking for you to forgive me. If you wanted to punch me, or- or throw me to the dogs, whatever— it's alright. I already told you that I wasn't looking for you to be alright right away, but I still want you to know that you'll always be family to me. To Techno, and to Phil, to all of us.

"No matter what, we just want you to be happy. And if that's without us, then so be it."

Slightly surprised, Tommy allows this to consume him for a few moments.

The still slightly 'out of it' part of his brain distantly wonders about how good of a conversation this is to have when they're probably inches from death, but whatever; Wilbur's always had a flair for the dramatics.

"I'd say we're fairly even, don't you think?" Tommy murmurs eventually, lifting his head to meet the man's eyes. When the confusion passes in them, Tommy looks away. "I mean, I did — uhm, I did nearly kill your family, Wil. The Banquet, remember? I was there. I was on Jester's side, I mean... I thought that he was just going to take down those that were corrupted, and at the time, I believed that you were one of those 'corrupted people.'"

Tommy takes a breath, already feeling anxiety prickle underneath his skin. If he's ever going to kill you, it's going to be now, a voice tells him, but he ignores it.

Wilbur could have killed him that night in the alleyway. If he didn't then, Tommy's fairly positive that he won't now.

Even so, his heart rate quickens in the silence that follows. The hand in his hair is at a standstill, but it doesn't move to tighten, nor does it move to reach for a weapon.

"I figured that you were," Wilbur begins, which does nothing to help Tommy's anxiety. "But, I'm rather glad that it was you."

A pause.

"You're- *what?*" Tommy's head shoots back up again, eyes wide.

Wilbur doesn't meet his eyes this time, but a small smile rests on his face. The edges of it crinkle with something that Tommy knows does not resemble happiness.

"I thought that my witness had to be connected to the Banquet somehow," Wilbur admits, hand resuming its simple movements in the boy's hair. "When I found out that it was you—that you're my witness—I went sort of... uh, catatonic. For multiple reasons, actually, not just because I'd nearly killed you twice, but because there was a third and fourth time."

Sensing the clear fear in the air, Wilbur quickly placates, "Oh, fuck— no, wait, shit, okay. I'm- Tommy, if I hadn't already made this clear to you, I'm not gonna kill you. Stars, I couldn't bear the idea of hurting a hair on your head, kiddo. I've known that you were connected to the Banquet incident for a day or two now and the whole thing's given me some time to think."



Wilbur swallows, ducking his head to meet Tommy's eyes, "I don't think it's your fault."

"But it is, I helped—"

"Helped what?" Wilbur interjects, raising his eyebrows. "You helped a man that was manipulating you into believing that this great big plan to explode a few corrupted heroes and villains alike with his plan? Hell, Tommy, that's not crazy- that's heroic."

At Tommy's raised eyebrow, Wilbur clears his throat and rephrases a bit.

"Okay, not heroic, but... *vigilantic*," he waves a hand around a bit, "If that's even a word— look, you get the picture, I hope. I don't think it's your fault for being dragged into something by someone you thought was a friend simply because you believed it was going to end with a few of your problems being gone."

There's a beat where Wilbur takes a moment, jaw setting in a way that reeks of danger. Somehow, Tommy knows that it isn't directed at him.

"I know you don't like to hear it, Tommy," he begins, tone low, "But you're just a kid. You're a child, and... after everything you've been through— Theseus and otherwise— I don't blame you for a second when it comes to what happened at the Banquet. I wouldn't blame you even if you had managed to send me to the Aether. Gods know that I deserve it just a little."

Tommy's lips purse at this, for multiple reasons.

"First of all, quit that," he reaches out, smacking Wilbur lightly in the side of the face. "If I can't self-deprecate, then neither can you. Second of all, stop patronising me. I'm more of a man than you will ever be."

It's no time for jokes, but Wilbur snorts anyways.

"Alright, alright," he placates, pulling out that dopey smile on his face again. "Still a child, though."

Tommy huffs, burying down the burning feeling to blurt out: *"Not quite as much as I was before you found me."* It might be a bad idea to let Wilbur know when his birthday was, for more reasons than one.

A real shit show it would be to see him freak out about that.

So, he stays quiet, burying his face back into Wilbur's sweater. A part of him knows that they should run, should go home before Morpheus returns from whatever outing he's found himself on, but Tommy can't find the strength to move.

All he's wanted since day one of being put in this cage is to be back with his family again. He wanted them all: Techno, Phil, Ranboo, Tubbo, Niki... everyone.

(A part of him wouldn't mind seeing Quackity or Charlie again, either, but he tries not to think too hard about what that would entail).

"They've all been worried about you, y'know," Wilbur speaks up suddenly, his hand returning to running through Tommy's hair.

Tommy resists the urge to flinch. Could Wilbur secretly hear thoughts or something and he just wasn't admitting it?

Now that he thought about it, did he even know the Bard's powers? Something about his voice, mind control... whatever. He shelves it off for a later conversation where they aren't stuck in this same dark and musty cell.

"All?" He asks instead.

Wilbur's smile grows a fraction, tucking a curl behind the boy's ear.

"Yeah, kid. *All*," he emphasizes the word, tilting his head a little. It's hard to see in the darkness, but Tommy's almost certain that the man's eyes are misty. What a crybaby, he thinks, blatantly ignoring the fact that he had created a wet spot at the front of the man's sweater only moments beforehand. "Phil, Techno, Ranboo, Tubbo, Sam... hell, everyone was involved, even some people that we hadn't originally expected."

Here, Wilbur laughs a little wetly, "I mean, the second that everyone at that diner you work at found out you were missing, they came knocking on our front door demanding that we 'let you free'. *Let you free*- as if they'd thought we kidnapped you or something."

Tommy laughs hoarsely, eyes watering.

*Everyone* had come looking for him. Gods, the mere thought of that made him want to both laugh and yell at someone all at once.

All this time that he's spent wallowing in this cell, entirely convinced that he was nothing but a passing friend in all of their lives; a replaceable object, nothing but a mere picture buried at the back of another phone's camera roll.

And here they'd been, supposedly trying to find him this whole time. It almost feels unreal, like just another punchline to the world's biggest joke.

He shakes his head, something happy bubbling in his chest for the first time in a while.

"That's ridiculous," Tommy whispers, reaching a hand upwards to wipe underneath his eyes. "You guys could never kidnap me. I'm simply— simply too *elusive* for you to catch."

"Really?" Wilbur hums, rolling right past the fact that they were here in the first place because Tommy had, in fact, been kidnapped. "I suppose you're—"

The man pauses, eyes widening in the darkness. His hands reach out, grabbing Tommy abruptly by the shoulders, immediately relinquishing with a little *sorry* when the boy flinches a little.

"Tommy, Tommy, holy shit," the man goes on to speak at a rapid speed, clearly excited about something. "Tommy, we- how didn't I even realize this earlier?- we *missed* it, Tommy."

"Missed it? Missed what?" Tommy blinks a little, hands holding onto Wilbur's wrists, fear boiling in his stomach.

"Your birthday," Wilbur emphasizes, his tone high-pitched. "Gods, kid, you're- you're, what, *sixteen* now?"

Oh, Tommy thinks. So he *had* known.

What's the worst thing about it, though, rather than the obvious, is the fact that Wilbur's remembered it right here, right *now*.

In a dingy ass cell, beneath a corrupted building, while they're most likely on the border of death. Awesome.

And, of course, there's the fact that Wilbur has actually remembered it to begin with.

Other than Dream, nobody's really remembered his birthday before now. Granted, the last one that he had was a month or so before Dream kicked him off of the side of the Tower, but nonetheless.

Knowing that someone remembered is enough for him to nearly cry all over again. Jesus, when did he get so sensitive?

Slowly, Tommy nods, "It- yeah, I guess. I'm sixteen."

"Can I- oh, kid, can I hug you again?" Wilbur questions in a whisper, the excitement mixed with a taste of melancholy.

It's with slight hesitation that Tommy nods once more, and there's hardly a second that passes before he's bundled up in Wilbur's arms again. It's a tight hug, just like the last, and it nearly takes his breath away for more ways than one.

"Happy birthday, little brother," Wilbur teases, and Tommy resists the urge to elbow him in the side.

Now isn't the time for random jokes or funny jabs. That can be saved for later, when they return to the surface and Tommy's back home again.

*If*, a voice reminds him at the back of his mind. *If you go back home again.*

The fear quickly replaces the growing warmth in Tommy's chest and he looks up, his head positioned underneath Wilbur's chin.

"We really should leave now, Wil," he mutters, "We haven't exactly got all the time in the world down here. Gods know how long Dream is going to be gone."

"Oh, he'll be gone for a while," Wilbur reassures, making Tommy's eyebrows furrow.

Like clockwork, his heart rate picks up again, and he's nearly pulling himself out of Wilbur's arms when the man quickly restates, "I mean- gods, I'm sorry, I'm not too good at this, am I? I just meant- remember how I said everyone's looking for you? Well, I meant *everyone*. Cosmos— or Karl, as you know him— distracted him for a bit."

He shrugs, as though it's the most simple thing in the world, "I figured I'd come to my senses and shoot him a call before dragging you out of here."

Cosmos being Karl made more sense than Tommy would like to admit, so he rolls right past it and onto the more important topic on hand.

He blinks, twisting the words through his mind, "You- you *what*? Are you serious?"

Wilbur laughs, a light but strained thing.

"Yes, I'm serious, Toms," he responds, "We've got a bit more time, but I wouldn't like to spend it down here in the pitch black, either. Stars know that you've spent far too long down here than you should have."

Despite himself, Tommy smiles warily, pulling himself out of Wilbur's arms. He's still close enough to see his face, yet far enough to get to his feet on his own.

"Yeah, I'd- you know, honestly, it would have been far better if we had just left in the first place, don't you think?" he begins, giving a wet laugh. "Pretty shit just sitting in here wallowing in our own self pity."

Wilbur hums in affirmation, arms dropping to his sides.

"Do you want some help getting up there, child?" He questions, arms crossing over his chest at how Tommy struggles to move his legs.

Numb from misuse, or maybe he had slowly been shaping his spine into the curvatures of the cell wall. The poetry he could write from these endeavours; now *that* would make him a fortune.

"No, I don't want your help," Tommy hisses, returning to reality and shooting Wilbur a glare. It's returned with a fond eye roll.

Content, Tommy turns away, reaching out to grab onto one of the cell bars to help hoist himself up.

The cold of metal burns into his fingertips as he shuffles around, legs still jelly from how long he'd been curled up in a ball and pressed into Wilbur's chest.

He heaves himself upwards, legs shaking a little. If he weren't so tired, he might give a triumphant laugh at being able to stand without help.

"See, Wil?" Tommy begins, a victorious smile taking over his face. He turns his head to face the man once more, "I can get up by myself, you—"

The words die in Tommy's throat.

There's been many times where he's been sat on the floor of his apartment, having this same debate with his friends, the constant question of: "*What's my response to fear?*" being thrown around each of them.

Tommy always gives the same answer: that his is *fight*.

Ranboo's told him before that he's actually *flight*, with a vague gesture to the notebook they'd used to plan their escape from Manberg. Tubbo has always thought that Tommy's a mixture of both, gathered together and pact into a singular human being somehow. That always made him laugh.

In truth, though, Tommy is neither one.

Tommy, much to his chagrin and his mentor's delight, is *fawn*.

At the feeling of fear boiling in the pits of Tommy's stomach, his limbs stick downwards and his bones seem to lock into place.

There, in the darkness, stands another figure directly behind Wilbur.

He's tall— not as tall as Wilbur, but close— and wears a circular mask that Tommy would recognize anywhere, shrouded in darkness or otherwise.

"Hello, Tommy," Morpheus greets, tone simple and amused. It's his everyday voice, the one that he'd use to greet Tommy for breakfast or dinner, to tell him about his day.

Tommy doesn't respond, tongue a limp thing in his mouth.

A spark ignites, a scratch as a match is dragged across sandpaper, and a flame is lit. It's small, but just enough light for Tommy's eyes to be immediately drawn towards it.

Deja vu resounds to only twenty minutes beforehand, flooding his mouth with the taste of metallic.

In the light, Tommy can make out where Dream is a bit more.

He's stood just behind Wilbur, blood splattered across his mask with orange flames flickering against the porcelain. His shoulders are relaxed, but his arms are tense, like he's ready to start up a fight.

"I'm back just in time for dinner, it looks like," the man comments lightly, blatantly ignoring the way Tommy's entire body flinches.



The man shifts, holding the match up higher, and his right arm tenses. The match flickers in the night, but Tommy can't quite see what's in Dream's other arm, no matter how much he tries to catch a glimpse out of the corner of his eye.

The two stare at one another for a few moments, black eyes boring into blue, until a choking sound interrupts their little contest.

Tommy's eyes fly to Wilbur, who is hunched over and coughing like something's caught in his throat. It's quite hard to see from this angle, but Tommy can barely make out one of his gloved hands being pressed to his mouth, curls shielding his eyes.

In a way, it almost looks like Wilbur's about to be sick on the floor.

Ignoring the numb feeling that's swallowed his body whole, Tommy rips his hand away from the iron bars and clammers back to his brother's side.

*Maybe he's not fawn, either,* he figures, knees digging into the cement floor as he kneels by Wilbur's side. There is no hesitation, no moment where he thinks of Dream, where he cares that he could die.

*You're an idiot, is what,* a voice, similar to Ranboo's, quips back at his own.

He ignores it.

"Wil?" Tommy speaks without recognition with his own voice, autonomous and fear-driven. "What is it? What's wrong? Did he hurt you?"

Dream clicks his tongue overhead, regaining Tommy's attention for a split second.

That's all he needs, really.

With a flourish, Dream drops the match, letting it roll across the floor.

Normally, Tommy would feel fear in these moments: a desperation to reach forwards and convince Wilbur to work through whatever stomach pain he's experiencing and get the two of them the fuck out of there.

None of that comes.

Tommy's eyes move slowly, as though his own mind is trying to rip him away from the truth.

Just there, in the very little light from Dream's match, he catches the glint of a sword's blade sticking out from between Wilbur's ribs. The tip drips with red, hitting the floor as a pin dropping in the silence of a room would.

*Your hubris, Tommy,* Dream's voice says in his head once more, like a broken record playing on a forever-sustaining jukebox,. *has never been me. It's always been you.*

Tommy barely hears it when the cage door creaks as it shuts, sending a clang loud enough to rattle his bones. His focus is completely directed to his brother in front of him, whose jaw is locked and nose wrinkled.

“Wilbur?” he begins, ignoring the sounds of heavy footfalls making their way from the cage. Dream wouldn’t leave; he always was one for “enjoying a show”.

(The thought that he would think of this situation as that sort of thing just makes Tommy’s breathing all the more erratic, a scratching of anger boiling at the back of his mind).

A startled laugh, on the borderline of acceptance and grief, greets Tommy in return.

He's unsure if the sound is relieving or not. In reality, he's unsure of *anything*. In this moment, there's only him and the sword that's still stuck between the man's ribs, stained and painted in blood.

*Wilbur's* blood.

Tommy chokes, a hand pressing to his mouth to contain the feeling of sickness swirling around in his gut. That was *Wilbur's* blood, and that was *Dream's* sword staring right back at him. He'd recognize it anywhere; the black sparkling with purple, the handle engraved with a sharpened smile that sticks out from Wilbur's back.

"Wilbur," he whispers, his tone halfway between a quiet scream and a plea. "O-oh my fucking— oh my fucking Gods, Wil— fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

The man laughs again, lifting his head to meet Tommy's eyes. The brown already seems to be slipping into a duller colour, hands bloodied from pressing into the spot where the blade still remains.

"It's okay, kid," he murmurs, reaching out to put his hand to Tommy's cheek. "It's better me than you, anyways."

"No," Tommy shakes his head, eyes blown wide. His words are unsteady, like the rocking of a boat at sea. "No, fucking— I've— I've died *before*, Wil, I know what it's like. You don't, you..." he chokes, reaching up to press Wilbur's hands to his face, head lowering. "Gods, please don't leave me. Don't leave me, Wil, *please*."

Wilbur hums, weakly pressing his fingertips against Tommy's hairline to sweep the baby hairs away. It's not much, but the boy leans into his brother's hands anyways.

"It's okay," the man reassures again, even if they both know it's not. "I'm gonna be okay, Toms. So long as you and my family are breathing, then I'm breathing, too."

Wilbur shifts a little, letting out a harsh breath of air through his teeth. He sits upright as much as he can and tips Tommy's face upwards so that he can look him in the eye.

"Listen to me, Tommy," he begins, eyes heavy-lidded as they search for Tommy's own. His tone takes on something a bit more serious, eyebrows furrowed. "I *promise* you that I'll see you again, okay? We'll pinky swear on it, okay? One more time."

One more time sounds far too much like *one last time* for Tommy's brain. He lets out a sharp sob, as though he's the one that's been stabbed instead.

In a way, he supposes that he has. They always did say that seeing a family member in pain was like you were experiencing the same thing, didn't they?

"Stop talking like that," Tommy begins to plead through gasps, tipping his head from Wilbur's hands to press it against his collarbone. He moves his arms from Wilbur's to grip the front of his brother's sweater, hating how cold he feels. Wilbur shouldn't be cold—he never felt *cold*. "You're not gonna die, Wil. I won't let you. Brothers, remember?"

A gentle laugh, Wilbur's arms winding loosely around Tommy's torso. The hug is returned without reluctance, Tommy pressing himself into the man's side, narrowly passing the blade through his midsection.

Tommy pretends as though it isn't even there, as if it were a prop in a play, a meaningless clothing item that Wilbur randomly decided was 'in fashion'. Anything, *anything* but the truth.

"Brothers," Wilbur confirms softly, a smile seeping through the edges of his tone. "Until the end and beyond, Tommy."

Tommy's head presses into Wilbur's neck, letting out another shuddering sob.

"Please don't go," he whispers again, fingers digging into the fabric of Wilbur's sweater, hating the way that blood sticks to his fingertips. At this point it's beyond a plea, and more of a prayer. "Please, *please* don't leave me. You promised you wouldn't, remember? Pinky promised. You can't go back on it, you..."

He trails off, listening for Wilbur's slow breathing. It's still there, just barely, the puffs of air against the top of his curls and his antennae only present when he's silent.

"You can't," he repeats, tone breaking. "You simply can't, there's still so much to do. I- I want to show you my favourite place in Eldritch Wings, and go back to lunch with you, Phil and Techno at the diner, and tell you stories, and—" his voice catches in his throat. The next words come out coarse; jagged rocks lined underneath a cliff top. "You promised that you'd sing to me someday, Wil. You can't..."

He trails off, tasting something salty and metallic in his mouth.

The beat of silence that comes lasts a bit longer than the last. Tommy's nearly on the precipice of somehow convincing his torn wings to fly again, to take him and Wilbur out of the building and get him as quickly to the nearest hospital as possible, when the man speaks again.

Not speaks, but sings.

The words are heavy with a bone-weighted exhaustion, but Tommy clings to each and every lyric just the same.

By the end of the second chorus, Wilbur's voice drops off, and the silence returns. This time, Tommy does nothing to break it, nothing to try and convince Wilbur to stay awake.

While clutching onto the back of his brother's cloak, a single wilted flower petal falls from Tommy's hair and onto the floor.

(Somewhere far off, a mother mourns at the doorstep of a place she'd called home, and a brother catches the scent of blood).

## Chapter End Notes

\*crawls out of casket\* hi everyone:D happy pride month! remember that you are loved & cared for, no matter your pronouns/gender identity or sexuality. you're doing amazing, and i am so proud of you, whether you're out, questioning, or still in the closet <3 stay safe this month, my fellow gays :) mwah /p

before anything else... hehehe. whoops, my hand slipped! [here's the song that wilbur was singing to tommy as he... well, c!wilbur'd!](#) giggles evilly !!!!

anywho, on to the weather! /ref

no but actually i've got some big stuff to chat about!!!

first of all, [crowley\\_galesofsong](#), my ABSOLUTE BELOVED, edited this entire chapter. all the italics and shit are brought to you by seim!!! go send him some love please, vae deserve it. absolute godsend, holy shit <33 a lifesaver, actually. i love aem dearly:( /genpos

secondly: writer's block still has me in a chokehold so i don't actually know when the next chapter will be out, but hopefully soon:D we r in the final home stretch !! WOOO!!!

thirdly: if you want to come yell at me for this chapter, i have a [discord server](#) now! i've had it for a while actually, i've just been terrified of inviting new people that i don't know, but i am trying to defeat that fear with a big stick. emphasis on *trying*. i probably won't be very active, but yeah ^\_^ !!! It's a small little server & very funky fresh <3 /so pos

on that note, please come say a big thank you to [leyn nebslem](#), [rin redacted](#), [foxie icyfox17](#), & [crowley\\_galesofsong](#) for helping me make this server / keep it Stabilised <3 they're all absolutely amazing people and i love them dearly.

please give their ao3s some love as well :D they are wonderful authors!!! /gen

WHEW okay!! i am disappearing into thin air again! come find me on discord (although i am offline/inactive *very* often), or i'll see u if i ever return from the fuckin Seas to upload a chap fr ... /bit !!

# not an update

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

hey hi hello everyone! :)

i'm so sorry for my absence!!

i've been thinking about how to phrase this for the past month or so? something like that. and each time, i draw a blank. i'm unsure where to even begin.

technoblade was and always will be one of my biggest comforts and inspirations. in dark times, he has lifted me (and others) up. i will never forget him. to all of his friends, family, and the ccs; i am so sorry for your loss. please take your time to grieve.

this fic will be put onto a hiatus!

i'm not sure how long it will last, or if it'll end at all, but i won't be writing for a while. (i highly doubt i'll leave you all on a cliffhanger or anything, so i'll try to get another chapter or two out there if possible!! :D)

i won't be deleting this fic of course, but i don't plan on writing for it or finishing it anytime soon <3

there are a few things i might actually want to rewrite, but i do want everyone to know that this fic has *always* and *will always* have a happy ending. for everyone. (except maybe dream).

if anything, i may go back into the fic and change a few things. nothing major, but i might edit it a little. i'm still unsure :)

on that note, please remember to take care of yourself. look after those around you, drink some water, rest, grieve—everything. it's okay to cry. take your time and remember that technoblade never dies.

my heart goes out to everyone. be safe out there <3

## Chapter End Notes

apologies for how short this is!

it's incredibly difficult for me to get all of my emotions out there and into words. stay safe out there & make sure you're taking care of yourself. check up on your loved ones :)

take care for now <3



# the quiet are restless, the silent are still

## Chapter Summary

"I'm here for my brother." Techno says, taking another step forward. He approaches cautiously, but with a range of anger. If there is to be a fight, he's ready for it.

"Your brother?" Morpheus echoes. He does a good job of looking confused. "Riddle me this, Blade. Why would *the Bard*, a supervillain involved in the most notorious underground villain network in Manberg, be in the *Hero Complex*?"

Techno takes another step forwards, hand tightening around the handle of his axe.

"I thought we weren't sugarcoating things." he murmurs.

or, a lot of things happen. i cannot explain. ~23k-ish words of pain and something else, i suppose. oh, and mumza's here too, so that's cool :D

## Chapter Notes

hello!

a gentle reminder that this fic has a lot of themes involving grief, death, and the guilt that's typically felt after a close one has died. please keep this in mind before you read this chapter, as it will delve into that. i promise there is still a happy ending to this fic, it just takes a minute to get there<3

as always with the heavier chaps, there will be a chapter summary in the comments for those who need it <3

**tw:** abuse, mentions & mild descriptions of past experimentation, **talk of minor & major character death**, after effects of a fire on a building, heavy mentions of depersonalisation & depression [specifically in hannah's part of the chapter], VERY morally grey characters (like, heavily morally grey), talk of murder, mentions of implied suicide, violence & blood, unreliable narrator.

second reminder that this chapter is a heavy one. please make sure you're in a proper & healthy mental state before reading <3 stay safe

(ch title from 'the crooked; the cradle' by the crane wives<3)

"It's snowing."

Ranboo glances up from his hand of cards, head swivelling in Tubbo's direction. He was just about to get another win in Old Maid against Purpled and Hannah (who, for people that apparently worked at a casino, absolutely suck at Old Maid). It was a nice way to nonchalantly get everything off of his mind, even if just for a little bit.

"Really?" He blinks, craning his neck a bit to the right. Tubbo has his face pressed up against the glass, floor-to-ceiling emerald green drapes pulled back to peer outside. It's just enough to see, but not enough to showcase a location to any lurkers around.

Tubbo nods, pulling the curtain back a little so that Ranboo can see. It is snowing— pretty hard, too, from the looks of it. Rather than falling gently like it had been a few nights beforehand, it falls in a thick blizzard. Hopefully it'll let up in a few hours.

A prick of worry enters Ranboo's chest when he remembers something. He sets the cards down beside him on the sofa, face-down. Hannah and Purpled pay him no mind. They hadn't been that into the card game, anyways, always shooting everyone strange glances, as though they planned to leave at any second.

Ranboo takes his place beside Tubbo at the window. He shoots a quick glance over his shoulder, before leaning down to whisper in his friend's ear, "Tommy's afraid of the cold."

Tubbo breathes out a short laugh, his tone lowering.

"If he heard you say that, he'd kill you," he responds, tapping a finger against the window frame. "I don't think he's afraid of it, he just doesn't like it. For someone that's always complaining about being overheated, he really hates the cold."

A fair point, really. Tommy never seemed like he was terrified of a snowflake landing on him, but more so *uncomfortable* with it. Everything about it tended to be just as confusing as Tommy himself was. A complication, a closed book... the whole shebang, really.

Ranboo had sworn to himself that they'd someday figure Tommy out, but it was proving pretty futile. Truthfully, they hadn't even figured *Tubbo* out, so the whole 'learning about people' ordeal that he'd thought would make a good passing time was truly just that. Time passes, wasting away at his fingertips.

Techno had once told him not to get so lost in his own mind, something about how *that can be detrimental in the long run*. It seemed like the man knew what the feeling was like, but Ranboo didn't want to press him for any further information.

"Do you think that he's alright?" Ranboo blurts out for what must be the tenth time today. It feels like such a simple question, but he knows that it's not. Nobody knows where Tommy is or where he could be going, much less if he'd up and left. For all they knew, he could be dead. Quite a few people would want someone like Tommy, who had been involved with the Banquet, gone.

The thought only makes Ranboo all the more nervous, bile gathering in his throat.

"I don't know," Tubbo shrugs, "I think so. I mean, he's Tommy. You've seen him, right? He can take care of himself. He's a bit of an idiot, but he can fight."

If there's one thing that Ranboo could remember, it's just that: Tommy is, above anything else, stronger than he thinks he is. Tubbo and him have tried to get their friend to put more confidence in himself in that area— only receiving a retorted *"I'm very self-assured!"* in return— but it doesn't seem to work.

It's one of those things that Ranboo's certain Tommy will have to figure out on his own, if he hasn't already.

Plus, Tommy... it doesn't even feel like he *has* to fight for himself. Although he's more the type of person to stand up against those who oppress him and push anyone nearby behind

him, it feels like— with remembering just how many people are currently worried for his well being— that Tommy doesn't even have to in the first place.

While he stands, arm stretched out over those he loves, they humour him and yet, at any sign of danger, move to stand in front of him instead.

Tommy doesn't know it, but there are people that love him.

Ranboo swallows any form of envy that forms in his throat at the thought. He shouldn't think of any sort of ill will towards Tommy, even if it is just a passing intrusive thought (he tended to have plenty of those). Tommy's one of his closest friends and, after all the shit that he's been through, if there's anyone that deserves to be loved unconditionally, it's him.

As though he's read his mind, Tubbo turns to him.

"What about you?" he questions, making Ranboo blink a couple times in his confusion.

"What?" They look down at him. Tubbo's giving him a look that he can't decipher. "What do you mean? What- what about me?"

"*You*, Ranboo," Tubbo nudges him in the side, lips pursing together. "You spend all of your time worrying about Tommy and me, but you really should focus on yourself for once, you know?"

Ranboo sucks air in through his teeth. He gears up to argue but Tubbo interjects again before he can even get a single word out of his mouth.

"I don't mean to be rude or anything, I'm just saying," he turns away, looking at the snowfall again. "You don't have to be so focused on others all the time, y'know? It's okay to look after yourself and figure out who you are before you try and help everyone else learn who they are. I know it's probably just one of those things you can't control, but I'm not stupid, Ran. I've seen how it affects you."

Despite the malice in his tone, Tubbo flashes him a side-smile. "Plus, I'm sure Tommy would want you to take care of yourself for once as well. In fact, I *know* that he would. Remember when he stayed with us after the Banquet?"

Swallowing the mirth that had been growing in his throat, Ranboo coughs out a laugh.

The Banquet, as much of a bad memory as it was, had its perks. Sure, the whole *Tommy declaring silence for days* part of it was not fun to experience, but he'd never be angry with his friend for it.

Tommy was still Tommy, even if he didn't want to speak much about what had happened or otherwise.

Ranboo nor Tubbo would ever judge him; truthfully, Ranboo's done it before, back when he'd first begun his vigilantism with Tubbo. It was a painful experience but it taught him sign language, so there was always that plus. (The memory pricks him in the side, though, when he recalls going over sign lessons with Tommy. He'd always claimed that someone had taught him a few simple phrases in the past, but never got the chance to continue learning it).

The days post-Banquet where Tommy was staying with Tubbo and Ranboo— as they refused to let him out of their sight, for multiple reasons than just the obvious— was an experience.

A good one, of course, but also a strange one, sort of like a friend that didn't normally visit had planned a sleepover during the winter break.

For one thing, Tommy would get angry at the smallest of things. That was pretty expected, though, considering he's Tommy. He'd probably get pissy if Ranboo left the bathroom door open an inch more than he should (not literally, but for the opportunity to make fun of his friend, he probably would).

But, he'd also be happy about strange things. Like the time everyone stayed up real late, watching the sunrise through the windows while a Marvel movie droned on in the

background. Tommy had once told him, quietly, that it was the little things that he loved, the smaller dots of the paint on a big canvas that made him happy.

It was so Tommy that it hurt.

On the days that Tommy wasn't so dragged down by some invisible force, he would help them. Tubbo with the tech that had been broken during the Banquet and Ranboo with his cooking. Everything about it reeked of *domesticity*: three best friends, isolated from the rest of the city and simply living together.

Tommy would dye his hair red with Ranboo's help and then he'd turn right around and force the guy to do something for himself. No making food for everyone, no psychoanalyzing each of his friends' faces: play a video game that he likes, or start a new television show that he's always found interesting despite Tubbo's dislike.

He'd reassure him that he was alright, that Tubbo would be okay for a couple hours without being supervised from the work he was doing in the other room, and send Ranboo on his way. It was nice to be cared about.

Where Tubbo was the same as Ranboo in every shape that came with working— the constant need to keep at it until it's perfect, or at least close to perfection— Tommy was the opposite. He was the balance to their friendship, the thing that kept them whole. Without him, Ranboo and Tubbo could survive, of course. He knew they could, but they'd still miss him.

Gods, Ranboo misses him now.

He knows that he isn't the only one, though. For once, it brings him comfort. No envy, no *'I wish that as many people loved me as they do him'*— just comfort. His friend is loved, and so is he.

"I guess you're right," Ranboo mutters, leaning against the window frame. "I don't think I really have time to worry about myself right now, though. Not with what's going on. As for Tommy..." he pauses, "He's strong. Not that he has to be, with how many people he has that love him, but he is. He'll be okay."

A heavy silence follows.

After quite some time, Tubbo finally clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He shifts on his feet, not turning to face his friend.

"Yeah, but... I don't know. Don't you think...?" He trails off, pursing his lips. "I know we've already crossed off the idea of Tommy running away on our list, but what if that is what's happened? We can't truly know unless he comes jumping back over the Manberg walls someday with random things from the outside world in hand, but I still think it's something we can consider, don't you?"

"We've talked about this, though," Ranboo exhales tiredly, watching a large clump of snow fall from the water drain to the floor with a muffled *poof*. "He would've told us, remember? He promised. You know he wouldn't just run off, especially not with all the people he'd be leaving behind."

Tubbo shrugs, "I'm slowly coming to terms with the fact that I don't actually know as much about Tommy as I had originally thought. He'll always be my best friend, but I think that it's best if you and I realise that he's not been completely open with us in the past."

Ranboo shrivels back a little.

That was... unexpected.

A part of Ranboo wishes to quip something back at Tubbo in Tommy's honour, to claim the fact that *"There's no reason for him to tell us things that he doesn't want to,"* but another presses him to keep quiet.

Tubbo's right. They *don't* know that much about Tommy.

Everything they do know about him comes from basic context clues. While he never explicitly said that he is Theseus, it was clear as day: his hatred of the heroes, his apathy to villains... all of it made sense if one was to compare it with the former supposedly-dead hero.

"Maybe you're right," Ranboo mutters, picking at a loose thread on their jacket. "We should focus on ourselves a bit more than the likes of others."

Tubbo tenses. The last thing that Ranboo wants is a fight, but the words had been Tubbo's own in the first place.

Instead of retorting, though, Tubbo's spine straightens. His head whips around towards the people sitting on the sofa, eyes settling particularly on Niki and Jack.

"Someone's at the door," he announces, peeling away from the window.

Niki and Jack rise in unison with the other two, barely getting the chance to shoot passing glares at one another before heading towards the front door. Curiosity takes over and Ranboo pulls the curtains back from the window again, poking his head out from behind it.

Standing at the front door, shrouded in a thick black coat and a big hat, stands a woman. She looks to be a few inches taller than Niki, or maybe even the same height. Something about the way she stands seems familiar but Ranboo can't quite put their finger on it.

Backing away from the door and taking a spot near the sofa, just in line with where he can partially see the expression on Niki's face from around the door, Ranboo clicks his jaw shut. He's tall enough to see over the group of people's heads, tall enough to make out the woman that stands on the threshold.

He looks away, swallowing the internal desire to know things. This isn't his battle, not really. As much as he knew the Craft family, he never truly knew them. Not like Niki does, and certainly not like Tubbo or Tommy did.



So, he remains silent, but keeps his ears open.

Niki frowns at the woman, shifting her weight in the doorway. Her eyes do a once-over to undoubtedly check for any sort of weapons before she asks a question. The question, rather.

"What're you here for?"

The woman's response is immediate, dark and deliberate, as though she's prepared it the whole way here: "My family."

Ranboo tenses, breath catching in their throat. He knows exactly who this is.

It's clear that Niki realises exactly who this is as well, demeanour barely calming.

She raises her head, tilting it a little.

"Where were you on the day that Troy fell?" Niki questions slowly, repeating the phrase that Phil had given to her before he'd left. The one made only to be asked and correctly answered by one person.

There is no smile in the woman's voice as she responds, only a heavy urgency.

"I was right there with you," she repeats, words mirroring Phil's own.

A short beat. Ranboo can practically see the small smile on Niki's face from where he's stood by the window, her hand extending out to meet the woman.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Kristin," Niki begins, her tone cheerful. "Phil told us that you'd be coming—"

"Do you know where he or Techno are?" The woman interrupts, making the words die in Niki's throat. "I really need to speak with them, it's—" she lets out a choked noise, almost like a sob. Ranboo's head snaps up, eyes immediately connecting with Tubbo's, who stands just beside him. "It's about Wilbur."

The room falls silent.

Ranboo— and gods, he really must learn to control his curiosity; it'll be the death of him one of these days— turns his head to catch another glimpse of the woman.

Underneath the large hat and piles of black-and-white hair, there is fear tracing every inch of Kristin's face. The expression is a grave thing, twisting the woman's features in a way that Ranboo has only seen one on other person before.

It's a wonder, really, that Kristin and Phil aren't Tommy's biological parents, he thinks, in a way that's almost bittersweet. (After all, she had the same white tangled with black that Tommy had in his fringe before it was dyed red. Wouldn't it make sense that she was his real mother after all? Ranboo pushes the thought away. He has white hair, too. It's just a genetic coincidence, truly).

"What about Wilbur?" Niki's whisper breaks the silence, her eyes blown wide. As much as she had preached about wanting to break his arm earlier, she now looks completely different. Her expression almost, but not quite, matches Kristin's own. "What happened to Wilbur? Is he alright? Did you find him?"

Kristin turns her head, looking back into the snow for a moment as though making sure that nobody had followed her here. When she looks back, her eyes make contact with Ranboo's, causing them to flinch.

"Ranboo," she states. It's not a question, no moment of reluctance in saying their name. It's as if she knows it for certain, and not just by a passing mention over the phone or elsewhere. Ranboo isn't sure if he should be afraid at this moment or not, but every thought dissipates as she says, "Where did Phil say he was going? He's not answering my phone calls."

Ranboo blinks a couple of times, shrinking back.

Because suddenly, here he is, in the spotlight again. Did this sort of thing ever end? It's why he'd turned down offers from both heroes and villains alike for positions on their teams in the first place: he didn't want to be up there, shrouded in fame like the rest of them.

That type of thing was made for people who actually wanted to have all eyes on them, like the Bard or Hypnos. Ranboo has only ever wanted to help people. The fame, to him, would be a con.

He glances over at Tubbo, hoping for some sort of reassurance and earning a placatingly strained smile. In the back of his mind, he can almost hear it: *"What about you? What do you want?"*

*This*, he figures. This is what he wants: to save people. Or, at least, provide some type of help that inevitably makes sure that they're alright in the end. Whether he's doing the saving or not, at least he helped in some type of way.

It's almost an ironic coincidence that the very person Ranboo needs to save this time is one of his best friends' brother. Or friend. He isn't quite sure of the relation, but even so... if they're even slightly important to Tommy, he'd care to help, just as he would if they were slightly important to Tubbo.

And if being partially in the spotlight of other people's conversations is a part of the buildup towards whatever is to happen, then so be it.

"He could've left his communicator behind, he was in a hurry. He went somewhere with Jester and Sam," he blurts, then backpedals a tad. "Or, uhm, you might know him as—"

"The Warden?" Kristin raises her eyebrow, nodding. She pulls her phone from her pocket—*oooh, a dress with pockets*—and begins dialing a number. "I'll call him, then. Thank you, Ranboo. Will you and Tubbo keep this place stabilised for a bit?"

Slightly surprised, Tubbo and Ranboo glance at each other.

"Yeah, sure," Tubbo speaks up for Ranboo, giving Kristin a big smile. "We've got everything under control, Kristin. Go figure things out."

"Great. Niki, Jack, will you two come with me?"

The two nod immediately, hurrying to follow her back out the front door without reluctance. Ranboo catches Jack reaching out to take his sister's hand, giving it a calming squeeze, and then the door slams shut behind the three of them. (If they are even related, Ranboo hasn't a clue, but they always seem to be whenever he sees them on the streets).

Once they've left, Ranboo takes a moment to glance at who is left. Him, Tubbo, and the other two that had been associated with Jester. He thinks that it's almost ironic how two out of four are from a completely different side from the opposite. There it is again— the irony.

"So," Tubbo pipes up, clapping his hands together in a way that startles the two from Jester's side. (Or, well, from their side as well. A temporary allyship, all for Tommy). "Now that the adults are gone, are you guys ready to get started?"

The two others blink.

"Started with what?" Hannah speaks up, tilting her head. Her earrings, made of glass-crafted fairy wings, shine underneath Phil's very humble lighting.

Ranboo would feel a slight fear for whatever it is she is (it's clear to them that these two are hybrids of some kind, but are hiding it. It's always easy to tell for them, somehow) if it wasn't for the current look on Tubbo's face.

A grin, sharp and mischievous, has plastered itself across his features in a way that screams *'I'm going to do a recreation of the Banquet but this time, it'll be just us four, and you two will be the ones nearly dying instead!'*

Ranboo has a suspicious feeling that tonight will not go as he had originally intended for it to go.

Only moments later, his worst fears are confirmed.

“We're going to build a bomb,” Tubbo states proudly, lifting his chin into the air.

Ranboo deflates. He's suddenly wishing that his friend had just been planning to hardwire a car again.

---

Phil coughs, pressing his sleeve over his nose and mouth.

It's far colder than he had expected it to be tonight, with the snow falling at a steady pace over the city. Somehow, though, the temperature had seemed to drop with the farther South the four of them got, the windows of Jester's car practically frosting over with the chill.

They had stopped the vehicle in the middle of a neighbourhood that looked more than deserted.

If Phil's being honest, the place looks like an absolute *wasteland*.

It's almost surreal just how quiet it is here, versus how it had been back in the Northwestern part of Manberg, where the streets bustled with people and cars no matter the time of night.

Sam, who had stepped out of the car right behind Phil, has a grim expression resting on his face, eyes trailing the buildings that look like they're out of a futuristic zombie apocalypse movie. Minus the zombies, of course.

"What the hell happened here?" Phil speaks up, looking to Jester now, whose expression matches Sam's own.

He shuts the passenger door behind him, refusing to meet Phil's eyes.

"Heroes did," is his only response, trekking forwards. "Follow Charlie and I, both of you. The building's only a block away from here."

"Why didn't we park there, then?" Phil questions, frowning. It's a bit more of a shock that Sam hasn't said a word this entire time. Phil supposes that the Warden may know more than he lets on, but the last thing that he wants to do is speak to the former top hero.

The slime hybrid— Charlie— turns on his heel, beginning to walk backwards by Jester's side.

"If Morpheus is still there when we get to the building, we're gonna wanna sneak up on him!" He responds, eyes bright with excitement. Phil would wonder why he's so excited about this if he hadn't caught onto the first part of the sentence and halted in his tracks.

For once, Sam's the first to speak up, eyes wide.

"This is about Morpheus?" He asks slowly. His tone sounds like it's full of anger, maybe even close to rage. It's almost strange to hear, considering Sam had previously worked right alongside Morpheus at the Complex.

Charlie's face pales a fraction, head swivelling towards Jester. Clearly, that wasn't something he should have said, but Phil's glad he did.

"What's he have to do with any of this?" Phil adds on, blinking owlishly. He feels fairly neutral about this sort of thing, considering what Morpheus had done for him. For his son, rather.

It isn't as though he likes the guy, just that he... could go as far as to say he owes him something. What, though, he isn't entirely sure of yet. He just hopes that it isn't something that will be used against him in future times, although a part of him is almost completely certain that's an issue that'll come to fruition soon.

To his surprise, Jester pauses in the middle of walking and sighs. When he turns, he drags a gloved hand down his face, suddenly looking as though he's aged a couple more years.

*Morpheus must've done a number on him*, Phil thinks bitterly, biting back a sharp wince. Before the hero saved his son, he probably would've had basically the same reaction to hearing the guy's name as well.

"I didn't want to say anything because it would've compromised Tommy," Jester begins, shoving his hands into his coat pockets. "It's not my business to explain why Morpheus is the potential candidate that's after him, but I'm sure if you two put your braincells together for once, you can connect the dots. I'd recommend not trying, though; it's not exactly your concern what's happened to the kid. My advice is to keep a level head, help me find him, and then question him. Whether or not he tells you the truth is up to him- not me."

Beside Phil, Sam tenses. It's almost strange, the look on his face: something close to horror.

"You're not saying..." he begins, voice dripping with horror.

Jester simply shoots him a look, rocking from heels to toes, "Again, I can't confirm anything, as it's really not my place to speak for Tommy. What you should know, though, is that Morpheus is dangerous. I'm sure the two of you know that full well already, but it's worth it for me to reiterate. Morpheus is by far one of the most disgusting people to ever walk the streets of Manberg, aside from the obvious."

Phil can't help but think Jester means the mayor of Manberg here. If that is the case, it's almost ironic how similar their minds think on certain topics, and yet how differently on others.

"He *can't* be that, though," Sam interjects, voice full of horror. "He- Morpheus is—"

The man quiets, shaking his head. The horror doesn't dissolve from his face, but he controls it more, keeping a hand clenched at his side and his breathing level.

*Is he truly that awful?* Phil thinks, tapping his finger against his thigh in worry. He'd known what Morpheus was like (the amount of times the hero had come close to nearly slaughtering Techno was too high to count; it was like he had some sort of rivalry with his eldest son), but this felt different.

Morpheus toyed with him and his family. He hurt them and laughed about it, but he'd also saved Wilbur from the flames. Had Phil been stupid to think that the hero was turning over a new leaf when instead he'd been doing the exact opposite?

As though reading Phil's mind, Jester gives him and Sam a strained smile.

"Let's keep going," Jester says, turning to head towards the building again. "We're nearly there. Remember to keep your voices down when we enter the lobby. Even if Morpheus is currently busy"—Phil doesn't like the way he says the word 'busy'—"we should still remain quiet."

When they reach the building itself, Phil's nose wrinkles. It looks a lot like Tommy's apartment complex but three times the height and, well... it's burnt to a crisp. Everything about it is ruined; walls have cracks in them (some even have holes), windows are shattered and boarded up... the place is a wreck.

"Why the hell would Morpheus take Tommy here?" Sam asks, sounding extremely strange. Worried, but in a far worse manner than he had been before.



At Sam's question, Jester's eyes cloud over with grief. Mourning, maybe?

"Tommy and I used to live here," he admits quietly, earning a shocked look from both Sam and Phil alike. "It was a long time ago, back when I wasn't so... you know. The person I am now, I guess."

"You and Tommy lived together?" Phil questions. It makes a lot more sense than it should, but even so, it only makes another flood of guilt enter his system. Jester had been friends—roommates, even—with Tommy. His next question comes out before he can even stop it. "Are you two family?"

Jester laughs a little, but it's sad.

"No, not biologically," he answers, shaking his head. Beside him, Charlie wears a very out-of-place expression. "I just saved him from something. Or someone, rather. He didn't have anywhere else to go and had to be in hiding for a couple of months, so I let him move in with me at my apartment."

"I lived there, too," Charlie pipes up, waving his hands around excitedly. "I moved in a bit later, but I was there! Tommy and I liked making pancakes."

Jester rolls his eyes, "You liked *burning* pancakes."

The guilt is going to eat Phil alive, it seems. Before he can say anything—what would he even say, though? That he's sorry, that he wishes he could've befriended him for Tommy's sake sooner?—Sam speaks up.

"I'm sorry to break up a nostalgic moment, but I really don't want to waste any more time trying to find Tommy," he murmurs, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

To Phil's surprise, Jester just swallows and nods in agreement. "Yeah, sorry, you're right. We'll head on in."

The man raises his head up a bit, turning to Charlie, "When we get in there, you're going to head in before us and scope out the place. Make sure that Morpheus is distracted if he's there, whatever. Sound good?"

Charlie nods excitedly, raising a hand in salute. Phil has to swallow a choked noise. He reminds him of Tommy a little bit.

"Great," Jester turns to Sam and Phil, giving them a grave look. With one hand, he gestures dramatically towards the busted doors of the apartment complex. "Shall we then, gentlemen?"

—

Hannah's lips are pursed together, a frown resting on her face. A couple feet away, kneeling down in the fresh snow fallen in the Archangel's backyard, are two boys that can't be any more than Purpled or Tommy's ages.

She's yet to remember their real names— Tubular and Rainbow or something?— but she does recognise them.

Although she hadn't been exactly clearheaded that day, lost in her thoughts while she allowed her legs and arms to move and do all the work for her (bus tables, hand out treats, etc.), she's more than certain that she could recognize the Rainbow kid anywhere. Maybe it's their height, or the fact that they're an Enderian hybrid, but they aren't a face that she could forget, despite the Banquet having been a masquerade ball.

Before the event, Quackity had told her and the rest of the committee participating each of the guests' names that they were planning on coming. Theirs was not one that she could remember.

*Had they even been invited in the first place?* She wonders, a part of her that's still alive feeling a prick of horror at the thought. Not that it bothers Hannah that children were

attending the Banquet or anything (she'd hardly bat an eye at the thought of Purpled and Tommy being placed amongst the rest), but it made her feel something. Not a good emotion, either.

It's strange.

For Hannah, life is merely a complex board game, or maybe one that contains an array of cards (oh, the irony of the thought. Quackity would laugh).

She doesn't believe that she's one of the players of the game, but simply another card in the deck, just like every other person in Manberg. It's all one big game, one large facade meant for nothing more than to entertain those above.

Hannah's long since learned this, has realised that pretty much anything is meaningless; that the concept of being alive was nothing more than a child's fairytale.

A terrible way to be thinking is something her therapist would say. Maybe even Purpled, who knew pretty much every way the cogs in Hannah's mind worked at this point. She doesn't care, though.

To Hannah, the idea of impulsivity is the same thing as a person's God speaking with them. To act on an impulse, to be reckless and yet still wary, is to follow destiny's guiding hand.

Purpled would definitely call her a hypocrite for this one, wondering how such a thing was even possible if Hannah lived by her autopilot-like lifestyle that desired strict scheduling in the first place, and Hannah wouldn't have a clue what to say in response. Not because she hasn't thought of a working argument, but because there *is* none.

Why Hannah's even here at the Archangel's house in the first place, something that had been completely out of her hand in terms of the part of her mind that preferred scheduling, is something she doesn't know.

She has a vague idea, of course, but everything that she does nowadays never seems to truly sink in. It just sort of happens.

*"What's the point of not living in the moment?" Purpled had asked her once, his arms crossed. "Isn't that the thing all those stupid fuckin' corny 'inspirational' movies from the 80's say? To live life in the moment, otherwise you'll miss something?"*

Hannah had been busy at the time, turning in a circle to gaze at her fairy wings in the floor-length mirrors placed in Las Nevadas' ballet studio. It was a daily thing for her to make sure that they were still intact, still working. A habit that she had developed at an early age that never seemed to go away.

She had simply shrugged, brushing the question off as though Purpled had just asked her what her favourite drink was.

*"I think it's better this way," she'd responded, holding a backwards pose to gaze at her wings a bit closer. "If I don't ever truly focus on what I'm doing, or what others are doing, wouldn't that make the world all the better? I mean, being impulsive could be seen as a flaw, but I think it's a blessing. If I act on impulse, then I'll always have to stick with my decisions."*

Purpled still thought it was a stupidass ideal to have, but she stuck with it, no matter how little logic it held. It had helped her in making past decisions that she has since not regretted, so what was the harm in continuing the same ideology?

She supposes, though, that the biggest flaw to this is the confusion that comes with it. Where there's autopilot, there is also error.

A wonderful example is today, one that she had originally expected to be fairly normal.

Quackity had told her the night before that he'd be gone most of the day to try and convince Tommy to visit Las Nevadas for a surprise birthday celebration (which she thought was pretty stupid of him; it was clear to her that Tommy wanted nothing to do with him or any of them again), which had only been canceled moments later when Charlie had called, claiming that the kid himself was missing.

As per usual, her and Purpled reacted with a great speed. Although she only knew so much about the kid, both from her time visiting Quackity's apartment before everything happened and from when he'd visit Las Nevadas almost every weekend, she's still grown fairly fond of the kid. She figures that a person can't meet Tommy and not realise that he's deserving of as much care as the world can muster for him.

Hannah supposes that's simply normal though, right? To feel as though she must care for a child, to feel concerned if one like Tommy is put into harm's way. That isn't anything new, it's just what Purpled would call *human nature*.

She'd have to remind him for the third time that, just because he's from outer space and she isn't, that still doesn't make her a human, but whatever.

The reason why she cares for any of them, much less Tommy, has always evaded her. There is no reason for what she sees in the kid. Maybe it's the same thing as Quackity (whatever that may be), but she can't quite put her finger on it.

In some strange, almost revelating way, she supposes that it could be that when she looks at Tommy, she sees her little sister Amber looking back at her.

She can see her in the broken wings resting on Tommy's back (hidden, but still there nonetheless). She sees her in the tired creases on Tommy's face, in the exhaustion that rests on his shoulders, in the white peeking out from red at the front strands of his blonde curls.

She hates it.

Not Tommy, just *it*: the person that she sees whenever she looks at him and the immense emotions that follow it.

He was the single reason that Hannah had originally left the Banquet early to begin with; it had nothing to do with the plan, but because she couldn't stand to see the horrified look on

Tommy's face as he stared at the number one hero from across the hall, at the man who had caused everything he has become.

Hannah wouldn't consider herself a protective person, despite the amount of times that she had threatened to tear Morpheus apart in Quackity's old apartment. It was a simple passing statement, of course, just an agreement with her business partner and technically-boss.

Something, though, meant the words. It could be how similar Tommy was to her late sister, or it could be that she's grown to care for him. It wouldn't be the first time, but it would be dangerous for her health.

After she had lost her family to a tragedy caused by people that no longer breathed the same air as her, she had no one else. It was just her and an array of crystals that she'd brought from her old house arranged delicately on her apartment's windowsill. Sometimes, there would be coworkers from her diner, but they never stayed longer than a week.

There wasn't a single person left from her past, not after what had happened. But, the ravagers had come and went; they were now resting underneath the dirt, buried twelve feet below, with her family six feet above them.

There wouldn't be anyone, either, until much later, when she'd bump into Quackity at the diner who was apparently looking for a third roommate. He could use the lesser rent pay, and she could use the company. It had been like destiny was finally directing her in the correct direction but, by then, she'd already established a 'code' on how to live the rest of her life.

After Quackity, she'd met Charlie, and from Charlie, she met Tommy.

She'd never forget the first time that she met Tommy. Honestly, she doubts that day would be one that anyone would forget, had they been there to witness it.

The sight of Quackity hauling a child that looked no older than eleven through the front door, both drenched in fresh snow, was one that would forever be ingrained in Hannah's mind. Meeting Tommy himself, as well, would be something different entirely.

From there, the new friendship that would one day become the employees of Las Nevadas sprung.

After what had happened in her past, Hannah had sworn to never go off of her scheduling, and no longer would she resort to feelings. She'd have company, but she wouldn't get attached. They were simply there to give her someone to ramble to, or for her to listen to speak when she needed it. Nothing more, nothing less.

And yet, the family that she had lost became one that she would be slowly putting back together inside of that little apartment just on the Southern side of Manberg.

It was a patchwork quilt of people that, in any other lifetime, she couldn't see herself becoming friends with. But here she was, constantly opening the door and checking if Purpled's alright when he falls sick (homesickness, he'd tell her, affected aliens differently than it did others) or playing arcade games with Charlie if Quackity's too busy to play with him instead.

In a short amount of time and a blur of events that have never quite hit her, she's gone from a waitress in a small rundown diner to one of the top people in the biggest gambling joint of Manberg. Well, biggest was used in heavy quotation marks; not many people knew of its existence. It took a high status and the willingness to resort to anonymity to enter the establishment, but nonetheless.

It paid well, gave three full-course meals a day, and she's... happy?

Happy. *Is* she happy?

She'd like to think that she is. It's a good thing that she's no longer working twelve hour shifts a day in a greasy diner, bussing tables for so long that by the time she returns to her old apartment she's collapsing on the threshold.

Plus, she has something that she could classify as 'friends'.

Friends.

That's the correct word for them, the more tired part of her brain says, the robotic one that Purpled always turns his nose up at whenever he hears her mention it. (It had been fairly funny, though, the day that Charlie had come running up to her terrified that she'd been turned into a robot, only for Purpled to be hot on the guy's heels, breathlessly explaining that it was only a metaphor).

Another part of Hannah would like to consider a different word, one that she's long since repressed deep at the back of her mind with the bloodied clothes she'd burnt in her old house's fireplace. That would be the very reason why she does the whole autopilot thing in the first place. Losing more people, people that she'd learned to care for in a moment of weakness, is something that she does not think she could bear again.

*And yet, she thinks bitterly at this moment, arms wrapped around herself as she stands outside of a supervillain's household in the dead of winter. Here I am, going out of my way to help a child that I hardly know that much of, simply because Quackity's asked it of me.*

Snow crunches and Hannah's head snaps up instinctively, wings flaring behind her. It's only Purpled, and he approaches without even lifting his hands in defense, everything about his body language calm. He's always seen her like this. At this point, it's become a daily thing. If she's not a million lightyears away, she's on edge.

Her shoulders relax a fraction, and she returns her gaze to the two other boys.

"What is it that you've been up to?" She questions underneath her breath, not so-much as glancing in Purpled's direction.

The kid scoffs, annoyed. "Scoping the place out. Nothing that should be of big importance to you."



Hannah hums. He is right, it's not exactly her business what Purpled does and why. Despite being only a year or so older than Tommy, he's pretty strong for his age. (That doesn't stop her from still worrying, though. It's like a switch in her head that she can't quite turn off, no matter how hard she tries to be indifferent.)

Exhaling, Purpled relaxes against the side railing of the porch.

"It's so boring here now that everyone's gone and we're left on- on *babysitting duty*," he complains quietly, before giving a little shudder. "I gotta admit though, that woman who left as soon as she came? There was something really off about her. Like, Morpheus off. I can't put my finger on it, though. It's kind of like she's..."

"Like Tommy?" Hannah finishes for him, nails tapping against her forearms. The tall kid chucks a piece of metal at the smaller one, instigating a small shouting match that makes her raise her eyebrows.

"Yeah, like Tommy," Purpled confirms, relief filling his tone. Clearly, he'd been trying to figure that one out for a while.

Silence falls between the two as they concentrate on the two children from the Banquet currently looking as though they're about to rip the other's head off. It's fairly amusing, like that one time when Tommy had thrown himself over the pool table at Las Nevadas to try and kill Purpled. Fun times.

"Did you track down how long it is from here to Las Nevadas during the car ride?" Hannah questions, already forming a plan in her head on how they can get there quickly if need be.

Not that she should, of course. As much as she wishes that action would come to light, it doesn't seem like there will be any of that tonight. Boredom, as it seems, is tonight's greatest appearance. Even so, she feels the need to always be prepared, always scheduled (even if sometimes, she doesn't follow it.)

"About thirty minutes, give or take." Purpled shifts on his feet. Hannah would think that he's uncomfortable with the cold if she didn't know that he kept his section of Las Nevadas at

below freezing temperatures. "I think if that kid over there drove we might get there a bit faster, though."

Hannah snorts in amusement, eyes flitting to the smaller boy that Purpled had been referring to. She has a feeling that he's right.

The two friends that they are practically babysitting are still fighting, but it seems like it somehow works in the long run for piecing whatever it is they're making together. They had called it a bomb, but Hannah isn't completely certain if she believes that. Could two seventeen-year-olds (or however the old they are) even make that sort of thing?

The shorter one suddenly stands up in anger and tackles the older one, throwing a punch, completely knocking Hannah out of her reverie.

In her bewilderment, Hannah glances at Purpled, whose expression mirrors her confused one.

"Have they been like this the whole time?" He questions, blinking as the two scuffle in the snow like two twelve year olds fighting over a Star Wars action figure. Not that Hannah's seen Purpled's baby pictures before or anything to know that's happened, of course.

"Kind of," her eyebrows raise again when the taller one suddenly rises, picking the metal contraption up and holding it up above their head. "I think it's just their language."

"Right. Their language," Purpled rubs a hand down the side of his face. "I guess I can't say shit, though. Tommy and I used to do the same thing all of the time."

Hannah snorts, despite herself. "I know. I've seen it."

And gotten it on record, she thinks with a smirk, watching the smaller kid try and leap upwards to grab the metal thing out of the taller one's hand.

"I think I'm going to lose my mind watching this," Purpled grumbles, rubbing a hand down his face. "It would be entertaining if they didn't keep going back to square one. Just fight it out and whoever knocks the other out wins, isn't that how it's supposed to work?"

"I wouldn't know," Hannah responds with a simple shrug. "Whenever I'd fight with my—" she pauses, catching herself. Gods, she really has to remember that this is Purpled she's talking to, not someone that really cares about her backstory. Purpled, as much as he feels like a brother or an estranged cousin of a sort, is nothing more than a coworker.

She clears her throat, correcting herself. "My friends in the past, I'd just bring up something that embarrassed them and use that against them. Sometimes, though, if it was an object, I'd grab it and simply fly away. Physical fights were never really my thing." She blinks, then adds, "But in saying that, it doesn't mean I won't fight if I need to."

Purpled grimaces, shuddering. "I really don't want to be involved if you ever do fight someone. Actually, I'd rather be there with a video camera."

"Why? Afraid I'll kick your ass?" Hannah grins sharply, showcasing an array of sharp teeth.

"No," Purpled tries to defend, but it's obvious that he knows that she would. "I would just rather not lose another antennae, thanks."

Hannah lets out a breathy laugh. Before she can think of another comment to tease Purpled with, her phone rings, a jingling of windchimes clinking together in the wind.

Pulling her phone from her pocket, she barely gives the contact a once over before swiping the 'answer' button.

"Hey, Quackity," she says into the receiver, leaning against the porch railing. Gods, it really is cold out here. Maybe she should've gone inside the second she'd seen that it was still snowing, but whatever.

*"Hannah,"* Charlie's voice comes through the receiver rather than Quackity's. He sounds concerned, which is never a good sign. Frankly, the fact that it's not Quackity who is currently speaking to her over the phone is enough of a red flag to make her on high alert. *"I need you and Purpled to get a car and meet us at the Hero Complex as soon as you can."*

Hannah blinks, slightly confused. "The Hero Complex? Why?"

*"Quackity says that it's important,"* Charlie responds quickly. Hannah hears a loud *bang!* sound over the phone, as though Charlie's just been slammed against the car door. She winces internally. Quackity is probably the one driving again.

"Right, but he does realise what'll happen if we go there, right?" She taps her fingernail against the case of her phone. She doesn't really care all that much if they have to go to the Complex, but it would drastically change a few things. Planning a funeral or two isn't exactly what she'd had planned on her agenda for the next couple of weeks.

Charlie hums worriedly over the phone. *"He knows. Meet us there, 'kay? Quickly."*

The phone line goes dead before Hannah can get out another word. She turns to meet Purpled's eyes, which are trained on hers curiously.

"Quackity?" He assumes, scanning her facial features for any signs of grieving. Not that Hannah would ever grieve, but she can't blame him for trying to find some sort of expression resonating on her face.

"Charlie, actually," she puts her phone into her pocket, anxiously hitting her elbow against the side railing as a way to anchor herself back to reality. "He told us to meet him and Quackity— and whoever else, no clue if the rest of the bunch are going— at the Hero Complex."

Expectantly, Purpled's nose wrinkles.

"The Hero Complex?" He repeats slowly. "They do know what that entails, right?"

"Yep," Hannah pops the 'p', running her hands through her hair. "Gather your shit, and send a note to any loved ones you may have. We're going to need to find a car and hopefully try not to die tonight."

Purpled purses his lips, turning his head.

"What about the two we're babysitting?" He asks, gesturing towards them with his thumb. How oblivious they are, too, continuing their fight over the object. Hannah has no clue what they're doing now (playing hot potato with it or something?) and she isn't all that sure she'd like to know.

Still, she sighs.

"Even if we left without them, I feel like they'd just come," she grumbles. As much as she doesn't know about... Tubular and Rainbow, or whatever their names had been, she is fairly certain of that much. If they're friends with Tommy, they'll want to be as in the loop as is physically possible with the current circumstances.

And judging by the fact that the last thing they'd said to Hannah and Purpled before booking it outside was that they planned on making a bomb... well, she's frankly worried about the integrity of the vehicle she and Purpled pick out if they were to simply leave the two of them behind.

Surprisingly, Purpled lets out a sharp exhale, as though he'd expected to hear this answer.

"Yeah, that's what I'd thought too," he murmurs. "I'd really not like to get our car blown to smithereens, if that is a bomb they've got there."

Hannah seriously doubts that the two of them made a bomb, much less would be playing hot potato with one, but Purpled still has a point. If they are the ones that had attended the

Banquet and know— no, they *undoubtedly* know— that she and Purpled had been a part of the ones that planned it out, then they'd be angry.

Understandably so, a rather irritating part of Hannah's brain argues. She ignores it.

"Will you get them? I'd really rather not deal with... that," she motions around with her hands, earning a sharp glare from Purpled.

He knows she's right, though, even if he'd never admit it. Despite her past, Hannah's really not the best with children. Purpled isn't, either, but at least he knows how to fight in ways that are fair and don't involve flying off into the air for higher ground.

With one last scowl directed her way, Purpled swivels his head to face the two. It's almost funny, the way his face contorts in confusion on how to get their attention. Yelling probably wouldn't do jackshit, so he resorts to the inevitable thing to do when it's snowing. He bends down, scoops up some fresh snow, forms it into a snowball, then chucks the thing full-force at them.

Hannah's unsure who he even aimed for to begin with, only to realise when he knocks the device out of both of their struggling hands and into the snow. They both glance at one another, then turn immediately to Purpled. The taller one looks fairly more shocked (and slightly scared), whilst the younger one just looks pissed, shooting Purpled the middle finger.

"Hey, man, what's your problem?" The shorter one that Hannah's still pretty sure is named Tubular shouts, throwing his hands up into the air. "You could've killed us!"

The taller one whacks Tubular on the back of the head, clicking their tongue against the top of their mouth.

"No, they couldn't have," they say, raising their eyebrows when Tubular's mouth drops open to argue. Hannah still hasn't got a clue whether she should believe that they do have an explosive device or not. For some reason, she has a feeling that neither one of them would tell her the truth, even if Rainbow looks far more friendly than Tubular.

Purpled rolls his eyes, irritated by their display. "Look, guys, we just got a call from Jester—"

"Mimic," Tubular tries with a strange grin.

Hannah's still amused by the constant power battle over what Quackity's supervillain name is. To be fair, it is entirely confusing (even though she doesn't quite understand it), but now probably isn't the time.

Despite her rather large indifference towards everything going on, other than the fact that it'll be ruining most of her upcoming plans, she still feels a faint worry for the urgency she'd heard in Charlie's voice.

"Whatever, just... he called us, and we're heading to the Hero Complex," Purpled gestures his hands around as he speaks, eyebrows raised in his *I'm patronising you* expression. "Do you two want to come or not?"

"Wait, why are you even asking us?" Rainbow questions, blinking wildly. "You don't know us."

Purpled sighs. Clearly, he had been hoping they wouldn't ask that question. Hannah silently laughs at him.

"When everyone else left, they were technically leaving the both of you in our care," Purpled waves his hand at Hannah when he says this.

If possible, Rainbow looks even more confused. Or, at least, Hannah thinks they do. It's difficult to tell what kind of expression they're making most of the time.

"Why are you saying that like you're our babysitters?" they question, shooting a glance at Tubular. "Did you hear that? They're acting like we're being *babysat* or something."

It is incredibly amusing to see Purpled on the verge of wanting to tear his hair out. Hannah secretly wishes that Quackity or Tommy were here to catch it on video, before dismissing the thought.

"We're not— we— *look*," Purpled drags his hands down his face, trying to find his place of possible zen. Pretty difficult to do so, though, in this type of environment. "Hannah and I don't give a shit whether you go or not, we just figured we'd ask. You probably both hate us after the whole Banquet ordeal, so I don't exactly blame you for saying no if you do. I just figured that it would be nice to ask."

A beat passes, where Tubular and Rainbow exchange another glance. Hannah's almost certain that whenever they do that, they're reading each other's minds or something. She wonders if that's what it's like to see her and Purpled discuss in the hallways by tapping morse code out onto their forearms.

"Why are we even going there in the first place?" Tubular questions, eyes focused on Hannah. She internally flinches. It's like the kid is looking into her soul. "Did something happen?"

It's clearly a question for her, so she clears her throat and speaks up.

"We don't know yet," she responds truthfully, biting the inside of her cheek. "If I'll be honest, I want to get there quickly. Q— *Jester* sounded fairly... worried on call." She decides not to bring up the fact that it had been Charlie that spoke to her and not Jester.

Tubular hums at this, shrugging. He turns and picks up the device from out of the snow, lifting it up and brushing it off.

"Alright, then," he grins wildly. "It'll be a great place to test out my new piece of technology."

Hannah takes that as a yes.



"No, no it will not be," Rainbow quickly says, reaching their hands out to try and snatch the thing out of Tubular's hands.

"So you did build a bomb, then?" Purpled's eyes flicker to the thing still being held in the taller one's hand.

The grin on the shorter one's face seems to grow, if even possible. Hannah believes that Quackity would be quite fond of this one, if he weren't so stuck in his own head all the time. (She could talk, really).

"It's not exactly a bomb," he begins, making the taller one huff.

"It is a bomb," the taller one counteracts, giving his friend a deadpan look. "No, literally, it is, Tubbo, it explodes things. Don't give me that look, that's literally the textbook *definition* of a bomb."

His friend— Tubbo, apparently. Hannah figures that she had been close enough when thinking of the word 'Tubular'— scoffs in annoyance.

"Right, it explodes shit, whatever. *But*, it's so much cooler because it's like- it's like five bombs in one, king." Tubbo reaches up and snatches the device from the taller kid suddenly. "Here, let me demonstrate."

Uncharacteristically, Purpled's eyes blow wide, suddenly reaching out to snatch the apparent bomb-but-also-not from the kid.

"No, let's not test it out here, alright?" He sounds relatively responsible for once, even though Hannah's fairly certain that he had mentioned in the car ride here that he'd dismantle the house brick by brick if he got bored enough. Then again, that wouldn't exactly blow him to hell and back. "Look, guys, we're in a bit of a hurry to get to the Complex, even if it doesn't look like it. Jester wants us there, so we're going to be there. Understood?"

Tubbo purses his lips, looking partially murderous. Hannah would pay good money to see him fight Purpled. She suspects that Tommy would, too, if he were here.

"Fine," Tubbo mutters, snatching the bomb out of Purpled's hands and shoving past him and Hannah. "We'll test it out on the way there, then."

"I don't like the way that sounds," Rainbow murmurs, sounding exasperated but not shocked. This must be a common thing, then.

Ignoring his friend, Tubbo turns to look at Hannah.

"Did Mr. Stick-Up-His-Arse bring a second car just in case that I can drive there?" He asks. She tilts her head.

"No, we took one car," she responds.

To her surprise, Tubbo only looks slightly pissed off about this. If anything, his friend looks inherently more bothered by the idea, especially when they see the look on Tubbo's face.

"Another one?" They question, exasperated.

Tubbo shrugs, "Traditional."

Hannah doesn't have a moment to even question it before the taller friend drags a hand down their face just as Purpled had done seconds beforehand, trudging past Hannah to follow Tubbo quickly.

"Just make sure it's not an expensive one, please," they try tiredly, realisation dawning on Hannah.

"Do you want to get to Tommy quickly or not, Ranboo?" Tubbo rebuttals venomously.

(Ah, so not *Rainbow* then, Hannah notes).

The back door slams closed behind the two of them, allowing Hannah and Purpled to catch a hissed "*I don't think he'd want us to be breaking the law just to find him, Tubbo!*" before it shuts all the way.

Hannah blinks a few times, turning her head to look at Purpled again. He seems fairly calm again, composure collected once more.

"Are you alright over there?" She asks, reaching out to nudge the boy in the side.

Purpled clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth, shoulders rolling forwards.

"Just thinking," he answers, tone thick with thought. Before she can ask what it's about, he walks ahead of her. "Your phone camera's functioning properly, right? I think Quackity would find it funny if we caught the explosion on camera and uploaded it to the Internet before anyone else gets the chance to."

Curiosity prods at the back of her mind, but Hannah has no choice but to follow along with it.

Even though she's ever so slightly worried for the plans that she'd made the morning after being canceled due to exhaustion, she is a tad excited to see if Tubbo does, in fact, blow the Hero Complex to smithereens.

Hopefully it'll calm whatever rageful part of her she's long since had to bury after meeting Tommy to see the place that inhabits all of the reasons he's so afraid burnt to the ground.

---

If the outside of Jester and Tommy's old apartment had looked bad, Phil soon learns that it's nothing compared to the inside.

The second that they enter through the front lobby doors, Sam has to duck to the side and cough into his elbow at the mere stench. It doesn't affect Phil's lungs as much as it does his eyes, which squint like he's trying to peer at something in a chlorinated pool.

"What the hell happened here?" Phil questions for what must be the third time. He shines his phone flashlight around the lobby, taking in the burnt sofa pushed up against one corner and the scattered papers at the front desk.

Ahead of him, Jester is walking up to the rickety old elevator at the center of the building.

"It was burnt to the ground a while ago," he explains calmly, staring at the broken elevator button on the side wall. "Tommy was devastated."

Phil's eyebrows raise. He'd known that the Southern part of Manberg had a high crime rate, what with how much attention the mayor paid towards the Northern and Western sanctums, but he couldn't imagine it being this bad. Then again, the place is practically a wasteland.

"Were you still living here when it was burned down?" Sam speaks up once he's recovered from his coughing fit. He moves to stand beside Phil, frowning a little when Jester mashes the elevator button.

Before Phil can make a comment like *'That won't work,'* Jester responds, "Yes, we were."

A heavy silence falls, cold and chilling. Sam and Phil exchange a look, like two old friends unsure of what to think after hearing something particularly horrific. It's awfully funny, in a way. Wilbur would probably use this opportunity to make fun of him, maybe even imply that he and the big bad Warden have more in common than he'd originally thought.

(Phil bites back the thought. He really misses Wilbur. He misses Techno, Tommy; all of them. That's the point of being here, though, to find them so that he no longer has to be stuck in the loop of missing them, when they could be right here beside him.)

The dinging sound of the elevator interrupts Phil and Sam's strange staring contest, both of their heads whipping towards the old machine that somehow still works. Despite it, Phil would almost rather exit the building and fly up than get into a rickety old elevator that would most definitely snap and fall several floors.

Phil clears his throat, watching Jester enter the elevator and hold the length of his arm against the doors. Sam is the first to walk into the thing, with only a second of hesitation beforehand. Phil bites the inside of his cheek, silently praying to whatever goddess he can think of at the moment, and steps inside.

The elevator doesn't smell much better than the lobby. In fact, he's almost convinced that it smells *worse*.

Desperately trying to ignore the way his nose wrinkles in protest, Phil turns to Jester.

"How'd you two get out when it went up?" He questions, for both the sake of distraction and for his own knowledge.

As much as he does care for Tommy, and as much as he knows that the rest of his family cares for Tommy, they don't know nearly as much about him as Phil would like to.

It's not necessarily a bad thing, of course; Tommy is entitled to his privacy, and he always will be. However, with the situation that's going on... Phil wants to know whatever he's able to fully lock in what the past could've been like for the kid. It could give him pointers as to where he could be, after all.

Jester huffs, pressing his thumb to the very heavily broken number *six* on the small display of buttons. To Phil's surprise, six seems to be the one that's falling apart the most, right next to

seven, which is the highest floor that the elevator goes to. He suspects that it isn't a coincidence.

The length of the elevator ride is shrouded in a deep silence between the three, minus the rickety clacking of the elevator traveling between floors (that definitely doesn't make both Sam and Phil tense).

Phil's almost certain that he won't be receiving an answer to his question until the doors slide open again and Jester pauses on the way out, head craning in his direction. "There was no *we* then."

*It's not much of an answer*, Phil thinks bitterly, following Jester and Sam as they exit onto the sixth floor. He probably won't get more to it, but he has his own theories about what the man could mean. None of them are particularly good, either, so he pushes them to the back of his head to think about later. *Later* probably being when he's found Tommy and doesn't have to keep being buddy-buddy with Jester any longer.

Even though he had been certain that the width of the building itself was quite large, the hallway in between different apartments is rather short. Phil assumes that it might just be a trick of the light, considering that there are nearly twenty apartments squashed together just on this one specific floor.

Following Jester's footsteps, he guesses that the man and Tommy's apartment is at the end of the hall, right beside a large ass window. It's one of those that is broken, glass strewn carelessly on the carpet underneath it. The breeze floats in, providing him with a little bit of oxygen that hasn't been polluted heavily with ash and other chemicals that could've been used during the fire.

The door to the apartment is closed. Jester knocks against it in a simple medley that Phil recognises as *A Shave and a Haircut*. Two seconds afterwards, the door swings open, revealing a very concerned looking Charlie.

"Nothing?" Jester questions, shoulders drooping a little.

"Not- not quite," Charlie whispers, stepping out of the way of the door so that the group can walk inside. "I didn't find Tommy or Morpheus, but there are some things that weren't here before."

"Things?" Sam pipes up now. He hasn't been very talkative this entire trip, but now he seems slightly alert, eyebrows pinched together. "What sort of things?"

Charlie hums nervously, swinging the door back and forth. Nervous.

"Just small things, really," he mutters, head turning to the large living room. "I can't really explain it, it just *feels* like someone was here."

*That doesn't help all that much*, Phil thinks, glancing around the apartment. It's small, but not much smaller than what Wilbur had described Tommy's looked like. He figures that it'd have to be a little larger, though, considering it housed a few people rather than only one.

Jester, as it is, seems lost in the depths of his mind. He stands in the center of the apartment, turning in a small circle to get a better look at everything. His expression is grave, almost like he's mourning somebody. Or *something*, in this case. Phil feels a pang of sympathy for him, but it's gone just as quickly as it came.

Sam saunters across the flat, looking incredibly like... himself, strangely enough. Well, at least, the way that Phil knows him as: the Warden, one of the stronger members of the Hero Complex.

*Former* member, Phil reminds himself, anchoring his thoughts back to the ground.

He wonders if Sam knows anything about what Morpheus could've been doing to Tommy. From the expression on the man's face— cold, distant; unreadable— he decides that now isn't the best time to ask. When it will be, though, he's just as uncertain.

When Phil returns his gaze to Jester, the man has moved to stand beside the window by the flat's kitchen. It's a big thing, probably a size larger than the one that had been busted in the hallway. Similar to that one, however, the glass has been shattered, but it doesn't look like any pieces have been left behind on the floor.

In a way, it seems like something had broken the window in the hallway with an external force, whereas this one was internal. He doesn't like to think about what it could've been.

"See anything out of the ordinary?" Phil asks Jester quietly, standing next to him but not close. None of them have stood close, minus Jester and Charlie. They wouldn't, if they valued their allyship together.

Then again, Phil had a feeling that all of them put together cared more for the kid that they're all looking for than about whatever politics had ruined them in the past. That would come to fruition at some point, but for now, finding Tommy was the only thought everyone had in mind.

Jester hums, shrugging his shoulders.

"Other than the usual signs of someone having been here recently, no," he admits, sounding thoroughly disappointed. His lip curls back up over his teeth, "I could've sworn that he would've been here, or at least Morpheus would've been..."

He shakes his head, exhaling. "I was wrong, though. I... uh, I apologise."

Phil blinks in surprise. Jester had apologised. That is new.

"It's not your fault," he says without hesitation. That is also new. "You'd gone with your gut, picked out a place you'd think that they'd be."

Jester huffs, a flat amusement entering his tone.



"Thanks," he responds, flashing a strange look at Phil. "Maybe after all of this, after we find Tommy and everything... we can try to form a more solidified allyship."

Phil smiles, but it's strained.

He's not too sure how wonderful the idea sounds, especially after the Banquet. Forgiveness for something like that, for something that had nearly cost him two of his sons and multiple friends... it wouldn't be something that comes easy, if at all. It would take time and rebuilding plus the potential idea of seeing a therapist.

However, there's also the matter of Tommy. If he is still friends with Jester, then Phil might be more willing to forgive. Maybe not entirely forgive, but just enough for Tommy. That would be something to consider in the long run. Techno wouldn't be too happy about it, but he'd begrudgingly go along with it, if it were something that Tommy wanted.

"We can talk about it," Phil offers. An olive branch.

Jester returns the smile. "Alright. Afterwards, then."

"Afterwards." Phil agrees. It's not much, but it's something.

Behind them, someone coughs. They startle, turning their heads in unison.

"What's the plan now?" Sam asks once he's caught their attention, looking particularly stressed. Again, Phil wonders just how much about this Sam might know but not be letting on.

"We return to Phil's place, try to sort things out with everyone else," Jester responds, shifting on his feet. He looks incredibly uncomfortable with his own words, as though they bother him just as much as they undoubtedly bother the other two. "I know that it's like we're going

right back to square one, but I really haven't got another place to look. The only solid evidence we have that Tommy was here is a feeling."

Sam's jaw clenches, turning away. His eyes meet Phil's, and for the first time since the search has begun, there's something more in them than just guilt.

"Phil, you have sons, right?" His tone is heavy.

Phil raises an eyebrow, unsure where this is going.

"I do," he confirms, shifting on his feet uncomfortably at his own affirmation.

Phil hasn't got a clue where his other sons are, either. They both practically ran off to find one another, starting with Tommy and ending with Techno. The nervous feeling in his chest that had already been steadily lifting itself off the ground seems to grow even more. Gods, would this search party become more than just finding Tommy, but finding the rest of Phil's children as well?

His stomach churns with unease, but he swallows the bile gathering in his throat.

"Then you know what it's like," Sam whispers, snapping all of the attention on him again.

Beside Phil, Jester's eyebrows raise, as though he's witnessing a horror movie first hand.

"Are you Tommy's...?" He can't even bring himself to say the word. Phil suddenly feels extremely put on the spot, even though the question isn't for him.

To say that it's not relieving when Sam quickly shakes his head would be a lie. Even Jester, who had tensed at where Sam's sentence was going, seems to relax at the confirmation that Tommy isn't, in fact, Sam's biological son.

Phil really shouldn't feel that way, though. If Tommy's father was Sam, he wouldn't know what to feel. Strange would be the best word for it.

He wouldn't stop caring for the kid like he was his own, but he'd definitely step aside from the adoption papers that he very much hadn't pulled up a month ago.

"I'm not his *biological* father," Sam swallows thickly, lowering his head. "But I've always felt like... I don't know. I've always felt like some sort of way towards him. This need to make sure he's alright, to check up on him. It's probably stupid now that I'm saying it, but..."

His gaze returns to Phil's. He no longer looks like the Warden, or even a former hero from the Complex. Now, he just looks like Sam Greene from down the street, baker and...

Phil blinks, registering something in the man's eyes. It's the same look that he sees when he searches his own face in the mirror. A father's expression, one both of fear and of care. It's hardly there, but just enough for him to feel taken aback. Sam is truly out of his element.

"I don't know what your relationship is with Tommy, whether you two are just coworkers or not, but..." Sam shuffles on his feet, "You have sons. Biological ones, and while that would be much harder, I feel like you'd be the person to understand what I'm kind of going through here."

Jester frowns at this, face contorting in a way that's dangerous. Phil can't even get a word in before the man's speaking, shattering whatever connection the two had been having.

"Now, hold on a second," Jester raises his hand, and Sam looks at him again. "Are you seriously suggesting that *you* think of *Tommy* as a son? That you care about him like that?"

"I am," Sam responds, slightly taken aback by the venom in Jester's words. Phil can't help but feel the same, despite his great dislike for the former hero. This is about Tommy, not their own personal feelings.

Jester lets out a laugh. It's not kind.

"You've got to be fucking kidding, right?" He begins, voice turning slightly shrill. He takes a few steps forwards, getting close to Sam in a way that makes Phil wince internally. "You are the biggest liar I've ever fucking met other than the *current* number one hero, Sam. You could never care about Tommy like that if you tried."

The reaction is instantaneous: Sam flinches as though the words have physically harmed him, and Phil's hand slowly inches towards his hip, where his pocket knife rests for *just in case* purposes.

The man looks as though he's about to say something in his defense, but Jester cuts him off.

"I know what you've done, Warden," Jester hisses through his teeth. "I know what your dirty fucking secrets are and all the silly little things that you keep locked in your closet. I've seen what heroes do to children on the streets that only want a job to support their family. I'm not an idiot. I have eyes. As far as I can tell, *you* are just as bad as Morpheus. You're using Tommy to swallow the guilt from over the years because everytime you look at him, all he does is remind you of all the kids that you could've saved, but *didn't*."

Sam's eyes widen, mouth agape, but Jester doesn't let him get a single word out.

"Do you want to know what Tommy told me after I'd helped him recover from what your fucking number one hero did to him? After I'd found him outside my apartment late at night, frozen to the bone and half-dead?" Jester lets out a stiff, menacing laugh. "He told me that whenever Morpheus would experiment on him, whenever he'd train with him, whenever he'd hurt him, that you did nothing but watch. You watched, Sam, and you did *nothing!*"

Jester lets out a heaving breath. The room feels as though it has suddenly dropped to seventy degrees colder.

Phil nor Sam say a thing. Not even Charlie, who has been watching the whole ordeal with wide eyes, breaks the silence. The slime doesn't look fearful, just shocked. He must see this sort of thing come out of Jester on a frequent basis. Phil isn't sure whether to feel bad for him or simply worried.

"What did Morpheus do to him?" Sam whispers suddenly, and Phil's heart leaps into his throat. The man's suddenly reversing the script, leaning his height over Jester. "You know something. You— I know what you were implying earlier, but it can't be true. It *can't* be. It's something else. Please, tell me it's not who I think it is."

Silence speaks louder than words, and the realisation hits Sam before it hits Phil. Then again, it felt like a long time coming—the denial phase is running its course now. Phil watches in real time as the man's face falls, much like a curtain at the end of a theatre performance.

"No," Sam whispers, horror filling his features. He takes a few steps back, hand shaking from where it's held up over his mouth. He looks like he's about to be sick. "No, no, please- please tell me you're lying, Jester. There's- not Tommy. Not Tommy. He's- he's dead. *It's not Tommy.*"

Phil blinks, confused. Dead? Who was dead? Certainly he didn't mean Tommy. There is no possible way for him to know that to begin with, unless this had all been some sort of set up (which, despite the two's differences in the past, Phil seriously doubted.)

All he'd heard was the dirty stuff about the Hero Complex that anyone who has a brain and is willing to do a few illegal things to get information knows: their experimentations on people with excessive hybrid traits or powers, most particularly, children.

"He's not dead," Jester spits out, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. "Not anymore, at least."

"Anymore..." Sam repeats, before sucking in a sharp breath. "Oh. It- he- *oh.*"

Tired of being out of the loop, Phil frowns.

"Oh what?" He looks at Jester. The man still won't meet his gaze. He reaches out, grabbing him by the forearm with a tight grip. "Oh what, Jester? What do you know?"

When Phil receives no response, his grip becomes tighter.

"Jester," he hisses, turning the man towards him. "If this has to something to do with Tommy and you're hiding it—"

"Theseus," the name comes out sharp-tongued and foreign, like Jester hadn't said it in a long time. The man rips his arm out of Phil's grip, levelling him with the darkest look that he can muster.

Phil's hand twitches from where it's raised, still as though it is trying to reach out and grab Jester's arm back.

"Theseus?" He repeats, slowly. That was the hero that Techno had been obsessed with for a while, the one that had died tragically after a fall from the roof of the Hero Complex. Techno had always been convinced that there was foul play involved, but it had never been proven. In fact, Theseus's case had gone cold after only a month or so due to *'insufficient evidence'*. In the end, it was ruled out to be one of two things: suicide, or a simple slip-and-fall.

Nothing about it made sense, though. There was nothing about Theseus that had to do with this, other than the fact that he was definitely one of the many children involved in the Complex's experimentation.

"Tell him, Sam," Jester spits, walking away from the window. When he passes the former hero, he shoves him with his shoulder, heading for the door. "Charlie, get the car ready and call Hannah. Tell them to meet us at the Hero Complex in twenty."

"Why're we going there?" Phil can hear Charlie question, fear spiking the slime hybrid's voice for once. "They don't like us there."

"Just do it, please."

The door slams shut behind the two, leaving Phil and Sam in its wake.

Two fathers, one locked box. Inside, a shared son's secret.

"What's this have to do with Theseus?" Phil questions, although he's fairly sure that he's beginning to understand.

The pieces are falling into place, the words that Jester had yelled at Sam about Tommy and the ones about 'him training' clicking together like fragments of a puzzle. Phil hopes—*pleads*, even—that he's wrong.

Before him, Sam shifts uncomfortably. The guilt in his eyes should be enough of an answer, but Phil has to hear it out loud.

"Tommy is just as much my son as he is yours," Phil snaps, taking a step forward. His hand reaches for the knife again, palm wrapping around the handle. "You tell me what the hell you know or else I'm killing you right here and now, Warden."

The two stare at one another. For a hot, uncomfortable second, Phil fears that he may have to repeat the threat, but Sam speaks

"He's Theseus," he blurts out, and Phil freezes.

*There it is*, his mind supplies unhelpfully. *Your confirmation.*

"I didn't know until- until now, like you," Sam runs a hand down his face. He looks as though he's aged thirty years by simply discussing this. "I'd thought that there was something up with Tommy for a while, but I figured it was just stuff at home. Maybe he was a vigilante in his

free time, but I didn't have a fucking clue that he was- that he could even *possibly* be Theseus because I thought that Theseus was *dead*."

"How isn't he?" Phil blurts out, breathless.

Sam tenses at this, and Phil grows closer.

"How isn't he dead, Sam?" He repeats.

Swallowing whatever he has in his throat—pride, or maybe guilt once more—Sam continues. His tone is flat and dull, as though he's seen the world come apart by the seams.

"There's something that the Hero Complex has been working on for a while now," he begins, fidgeting a little. "They've only tested it on one human before, but it went... wrong. The results with animals weren't very successful, either, but those were simply trial runs. The human one was something else entirely. If you've seen a zombie movie, one of those old ones where they take over the world in an apocalypse... that's what they looked like after the experiments."

Phil's heart beats in his ears.

If Sam's implying what he thinks he's implying, then there's more danger to the experiments than he had originally thought. There had already been plans in place with the rest of the Syndicate to dismantle all of the experiments from the roots, starting with the bottom of the rung and working their way up, but it had only been a plan.

The hopes to make plans come to fruition had been a long time coming, but the Banquet had gotten in the way of quite a lot of it. Phil had hoped when Kristin came into town that she'd be able to help them destroy the experimentation. Even if working on it took getting to the media, which would be fairly easy with Fundy on their side, they'd go through with it.



The only thing that none of them seemed to know, though, is what it was that they were doing to the people that they were experimenting on. All anyone knew was that the experiments were happening, and children being swooped off of the streets were never seen again. (Or, if they were, something about them was wrong. Different. They all would fall ill within weeks and end up dying.)

"What exactly are they testing?" Phil whispers what he's always wondered. He's fearful of the worst, of whatever the hell it could be from his vast variety of theories. As much as he hopes that it isn't one he's thought of, he's more bent on the hope that it isn't something *worse* than what he's thought up.

Ignorance is bliss, but Phil has never been one for bliss.

Sam's answer comes out short and simple, twisted and carved dangerously.

"Revival."

Phil's teeth click as he tenses, heart thrumming against his chest, his head, behind his eyes. Revival. They had revived Theseus. Theseus is Tommy. Tommy died. Morpheus...

The loud blaring of a phone call startles them both.

With shaking hands, Phil removes his phone from his pocket and presses it to his ear. He doesn't even have to glance at the contact name to know who's calling, the same ringtone of *The Good Place's* fluttery intro music set to only one person in particular's contact name.

"Kristin?" He begins, hoping that his voice doesn't shake too much. She'll definitely see through him, just as she always does, but he can reassure her that it's nothing until she gets home. It'll be better to explain it in person, to discuss everything quietly on the sofa, rather than while in a state of horror over the phone. "Is everything alright—?"

"Phil, it's Wilbur," Kristin's voice is close to hysterics on the other line, but soft, as though she's whispering. The words come out abruptly, cutting him off in a way that should tell him right away that something's happened.

Phil's blood runs cold, his grip tightening over his phone.

"What's Wilbur? Did you find him?" He turns away, facing outside the window. His free hand remains planted on his knife, prepared to slash it at Sam if need be.

Kristin lets out a shuddering sob that nearly has him jumping out of the window and flying back home. "Phil, I think- I think he's hurt. *Badly.*"

Any words that Phil could've thought to respond with die in his throat. *Badly* usually said a lot more than it should. For anyone else, it merely meant hospitalisation. For Phil's family, he knew that it meant death, or close to it.

"I don't know if my powers are acting up again, or if I'm just overly stressed, but I—" her words muffle, as though she's pressing her hand to her mouth. "Something's wrong. It's almost like I can feel the life slipping out of him. Like- like I can *hear* his heartbeat slowing down."

Phil's eyes go to the floor, throat filling with something. Grief? Regret? *Mourning?*

He isn't sure.

Nothing's even been confirmed yet. There is no way for either of them to know if Wilbur's dead, and yet... Kristin's never been wrong about her feelings. She's Blessed with the Death Goddess's mark and has always been wary of her family being in the sights of danger.

Once during a patrol, she'd phoned Phil and let him know that Techno was in a tight spot and needed help. She didn't exactly say the words '*on the brink of death*', but she might as well have.

When Phil had found Techno a few blocks away from his patrol post, he looked on the verge of death. The same thing had happened more recently when he'd gotten hurt and just-so-happened to fall into debt with Tommy. (A part of Phil wonders if, back then, Tommy had known the same thing that Kristin knows now. Having been revived, would that make him Blessed as well?)

Something underneath Phil's foot catches his eye. It shines in the moonlight, glittering in the night.

For a moment, Phil feels like it's just a random piece of glass. He moves his foot and his stomach twists for the fifth time tonight.

He bends down, ignoring Kristin calling his name into the receiver.

It's an emerald, undoubtedly the very one that he remembered helping Wilbur and Techno pick out for Tommy to wear when they'd declared him a rightful member of their family. The stone has the same gold wrapping around its middle and coming off at the top, where it'd normally be hooked to the boy's necklace.

Phil turns the stone around in his hand, looking at the scuff marks on the surface. Tommy had promised Wilbur that he'd never take it off, and he hadn't. Everytime that Phil saw the kid since, he had the necklace on full display, resting just over his heart. It brought a warm feeling to Phil's chest whenever he saw it, a small reminder that Tommy cared for them just as much as they cared for him.

Something clicks in the whirring of Phil's brain, and suddenly he's fully alert. His hand closes over Tommy's emerald, feeling something swirl in his chest. It's close to rage. Carefully, he rises to full height, walking up to the window and leaning outside of it.

If he looks sharp enough—and his enhanced eyesight that comes with being an Elytrian helps—he can see the outline of the Hero Complex in the distance.

"Kristin," he interrupts her frantic calling of his name, hand tightening around Tommy's emerald. "I think I might know where Wilbur and Tommy are."

---

Techno's moves are fluid and dangerous, each one hardwired into his mind and conducted without a second thought. When he gets this way— lost in his mind, lost in the fear that tugs at the space between his ribs— there is no hesitation to stop and think about his actions.

He supposes that's what made him a villain in the first place. His lack of control, his spontaneous nature. Both of his flaws, ones that he was certain he had defeated long ago, have been the very things to make him who he is today: the feared high-ranking supervillain, the Blade.

If that's the case, though, then wouldn't most of the heroes appraised by the people of Manberg also be dragged down to villainy? He couldn't know, and in this moment, he wouldn't know. For now, the only thing he knows is this: his brother, his *twin* brother, is somewhere in the Complex, and he's bleeding.

Techno doesn't know how bad the wound is or if it's fatal, all he knows is that Wilbur's bleeding somewhere in this vicinity.

He stalks through the halls of the Complex, flecked with the blood of guards that had tried to stop him. Overhead, the alarms are blaring. He expects an army of the top heroes to converge on him at any second, but he couldn't care. All he wants to know, all he needs to know is where his brother is and if he's alright.

To Techno's right, there's the clicking of heavy boots against the granite floor. They're sooner than Techno expected. When the army enters the main lobby where Techno is stood, breathing heavily and axe in hand, it's here that he realises that there is no army.

Standing opposite to him, staring with that horrid porcelain smiley-faced mask, is Morpheus. He's decked out in his glowing purple armour, head tilted to the right. His mask always feels

so patronising, like the hero himself is always smiling, no matter the topic of conversation or action he commits. Techno always hated it.

Here, though, there is a slight dilemma. He can feel it, even as his mind swirls like the depths of a hurricane. Somewhere in the center (just as every storm has an eye), there is peace. And with it, his bones relax, jaw slackening a fraction.

Morpheus and him have never been on good terms. In fact, he's certain that the only time he's ever considered not breaking the man's nose through the mask is when he'd saved his brother from being crushed beneath a fallen part of the Banquet's roofing.

The dilemma at hand, so it seems, is just that: does he or does not he wish to throw Morpheus through a wall, to force him to explain where Wilbur is while he dangles him over the side of the highest point in Manberg? No, the last one is too irrational.

Instead, he forces himself to calm, and speaks.

"Morpheus," he greets hoarsely.

"The Blade," Morpheus responds, leaning against the wall. For someone that's walked into a room with all of his guards bleeding on the ground (not dead, but close to it) and the perpetrator standing in the midst of it, Morpheus seems far too calm. "It's nice to see you again. What's it been, a couple weeks, maybe?"

Small talk.

Techno bites his tongue.

"I don't know," he answers truthfully, taking a step forward.

Morpheus hums accordingly, "I suppose there's no reason to sugarcoat it, then. You're here for something. I certainly hope it's not me."

The last part sounds like a joke, but a part of Techno tells him it's not.

"I'm here for my brother," Techno says, taking another step forward. He approaches cautiously, but with a range of anger. If there is to be a fight, he's ready for it.

"Your brother?" Morpheus echoes. He does a good job of looking confused. "Riddle me this, Blade. Why would the Bard, a supervillain involved in the most notorious underground villain network in Manberg, be in the Hero Complex?"

Techno takes another step forwards, hand tightening around the handle of his axe.

"I thought we weren't sugarcoating things," he murmurs. Once he's face-to-face with Morpheus, he leans down a little. There isn't that large of a difference in height; maybe two inches, give or take. "Look, Morpheus. I know that my brother's here. From the way you're talkin', I can only assume that you're part of the reason as to why I can smell his blood from outside."

For a few moments, Morpheus doesn't respond. He simply tilts his head up, staring Techno right in the eyes with the holes drilled into the painted on parts of his mask.

Then, he starts laughing. It's loud, a burst of barking laughter that makes Techno's skin crawl.

Nothing about it sounds happy.

"Do you *seriously* think that I'd hurt your brother, Blade?" Morpheus questions once he's finished laughing, arms crossing over his chest. A beat of silence, and he sighs, raising his hands in mock defense. "Look, if I wanted the Bard dead, don't you think I would have left him to die that day during the Banquet?"

It is a fair point. Techno's shoulders loosen a fraction.

"Then why do I smell his blood here?" He asks, eyes darting around the room. Still, there's nobody around. Strange.

"Well, he *did* swing by to visit," Morpheus begins, leaning against the wall. "Said he was looking for some kid named Tommy. I told him that I didn't know anyone named Tommy, but Wilbur wouldn't have it. He was being a bit of an ass, as he typically is, so I decided to humour him by letting him search the Complex, so long as he'd leave immediately afterwards. I mean, he's got two other heroes following him around, so it's not like he can get away with anything."

Here, Morpheus shrugs, ever so nonchalant. Like he's explaining the events that he'd gone through during his day, rather than the fact that he's let a literal supervillain into one of— if not the most— top secret base in all of Manberg. Well, not exactly *top secret*, but more so *heavily guarded*.

"Maybe he tried something and got his nose broken. I wouldn't know, it's not exactly my problem," Morpheus clicks his tongue. "But, I suppose it is now, considering..." he glances at the bodies over Techno's shoulder, breathing out a sigh. "Look, how about this, then? We'll come to a compromise. You don't kill anymore of my guards, and I'll find your brother and bring him to you. Sound fair?"

Techno thinks on this a moment. It's not entirely that fair of a compromise, considering that he's already taken out every guard on this floor. If anything, it's more in his favour than anything else.

Despite that being the case, he declines it anyways.

"I want to come with you," he grumbles, taking a few steps back so he's no longer towering over the hero.

To his surprise, Morpheus only nods.

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that," he turns on his heel, heading down the hallway. Techno doesn't argue, following close on his heels. "If you follow me and try to *not* destroy the rest of my building, I'll show you to the top floor. From my extensive knowledge of the Complex's general anatomy, I'm guessing that they'd have gotten to the roof by now."

Their footsteps echo against the empty walls. Techno's nose shrivels a bit.

"Where is everyone?" he questions, staring at the pictures on the walls that they pass by.

His breath catches in his throat as they walk past a particular one, framed in sparkling gold. Even though they're walking fairly quickly through the hall, it's like time slows at the sight.

Theseus is stood in the middle of the stage, his head down a little. Morpheus, the very one who Techno follows close behind, positioned beside him with his hand planted firmly on the former hero's shoulder.

"Hypnos and Arsonist are supervising your brother," Morpheus responds to his question, snapping him out of his thoughts. The man doesn't even turn his head. "As for Captain and the rest of them, I'd assume they're all on patrol. That tends to happen."

"The alarms are still blaring," Techno responds, feeling a chill go down his spine. He's got a weird feeling about this place. It's weirdly dreamlike, in a way.

Morpheus waves his hand in the air, "I would ignore it. Stuff like this happens all the time here. Hypnos is probably on his way down to the basement to shut them off. You and I both know we don't need the two of them together to take down your brother if need be."

Techno tastes bitterness in the air. It's amusing.



Technically, he could start a fight— "*What's that supposed to mean?*" rests venomously on his tongue— but it would probably be in his worst interest. For all he knows, Morpheus could send some type of signal up to his pals and they'd hurt the Bard. Not that they could; Wilbur's far stronger than he looks.

(What the smell of blood could possibly be from, Techno does his best to ignore).

The pair continue to walk through the corridor, occasionally passing doors that Techno cannot understand.

It seems the further they walk, the stronger the smell of blood becomes, almost like Techno's being drawn right towards it. It's undoubtedly Wilbur's blood, though. Had he accidentally cut his ankle or something? The thought sounds too ordinary to be true. Plus, Wilbur's fairly strong. It took a lot for him to bleed, much less strongly enough for Techno to smell it from outside.

As Techno's suspicions grow (and his sudden wish that he hadn't left his weapons in the next room over increase), they pass by another one of the mysterious doors lining the right wall. It should have garnered nothing more than a simple glance, but it doesn't.

The second that the smell hits him— the very moment that the scent of Wilbur's blood becomes stronger— Techno's moving.

One hand reaches out to whirl Morpheus around, slamming the hero's back against the wall. His other arm presses against Morpheus' esophagus, holding him up against the far-too-clean walls and leaning in close.

"You and I both know that I don't need my weapons to kill you, so let's get this over with and move on, yeah?" Techno presses his forearm into the hero's throat, emitting a choked noise from him. "When I let go of you, you're going to lead me to where Tommy and Wilbur are, and you're going to do it *quietly*."

In front of him, Morpheus tenses as though he's about to speak, but Techno doesn't give him the chance.

“You're not going to turn around, you're not going to signal to your pals that are most likely lightyears away from here about what's going on, *none* of that,” he hisses out, jaw clenched. “You're going to hold your head up high and lead me there, or else I'm going to ensure you die right here, right now.”

Techno tilts his head, pausing to let his words sink in.

"Is that understood?" he questions, tone dripping with repulsion.

He can't see it, but he's almost certain that there's a strange sort of look in Morpheus's eyes beneath that mask.

"All of this over some blood?" are the first rather stupid words out of Morpheus's mouth. He sounds amused. Borderline fascinated, as if this whole thing's one big joke to him.

"All of this over *whose* blood," Techno corrects, jaw clenching. "You think you're clever, trying to dissuade me from the truth? What was your plan, then? Let me believe that Wilbur was on the top floor and then kick me over the ledge like you did to Theseus?"

Silence. Techno takes the opportunity to continue, pressing his arm tighter against the hero's neck. No longer does he care if he accidentally kills him.

"I've never been ignorant to your lies, Morpheus," his tone is malicious, unmerciful. "I know what you did. I know the person that you are, and I know the person that you tried to kill that day."

It's here that Morpheus finally speaks, tone choked, but not fearful. Never fearful.

"Tried to'?" he laughs, a hoarse sound. "Blade, if you've done such extensive research, you'd have known that Theseus died that day."

"Do you take me for an idiot?" Techno's voice drops dangerously, letting every bit of rage he's felt over the year slip into his tone. *Finally*, he thinks, *I seek justice for the one you've let fall, Lycomedes*. "I know who you killed that day, Morpheus, and I know who you *didn't* kill."

The threat hangs loosely in the air for a few moments.

Techno's almost certain that Morpheus finds none of this concerning in the slightest, and the thought makes him want to break the hero's neck here and leave him for dead.

His rather brilliant idea is quickly interrupted in a what Tommy would like to call 'super anti climatic scene' when a voice breaks through the air, cutting like a sharpened knife through static.

"Techno?"

At the sound, he freezes, and turns. His arm doesn't drop.

Three people stand on one side of the hallway, and two on the other. No person speaks, but expressions say far more than words ever could.

Techno swallows the dryness in his throat.

He had thought of a billion different ways that he would reunite with his mother. Maybe he and Wilbur would bake her a lovely *Welcome Home!* cake and destroy the kitchen, or Phil and even Tommy could help them make big signs to greet her at the airport with.

But this, standing with his arm to an enemy's windpipe (when the last thing that Kristin ever wanted was for them to turn to killing people, despite being villains), was the very last thing on his list.

It's a conversation for another time, though.

"Kristin," Techno greets, keeping his tone as calm as he can. "You're home."

It's simple. Not everything that he wanted to do, not the grandeur display that he'd have liked to put on for her, but it's still something nonetheless.

His mother smiles at him, but it's strained. Her eyes remain on Morpheus, trained on the man's body language, on his size.

At her sides, Techno takes notice of Niki and Jack, who look equally as flabbergasted to see the number one hero pinned to the wall as Kristin does. Techno isn't exactly telepathic— that was once *Skeppy's* job— but it's not difficult to tell the biggest, unanimous question going through everyone's heads: *Why isn't he fighting back?*

Morpheus was and always has been a fighter. He always had to have the upper hand, even when up against those who were stronger than him. Techno has fought him hand-to-hand before and won, but it was a tough battle.

Realisation clicks, and Techno wishes that it hadn't.

He loosens his grip on the hero without much else thought, letting him slip to the ground. He backs up a few feet, something uneasy settling in his stomach.

"Why aren't you fighting back?" Techno verbalises, ignoring Jack's sharp intake of breath. He must know then, too.

Morpheus doesn't respond, head facing the floor.

"Why aren't you *fighting back*?" Techno repeats himself in a louder tone, leaning down close to Morpheus. He eases back on his haunches, making sure that he can appear as threatening as possible.

Techno expects silence to come from the man again, or maybe even a blank look, but instead he gets *laughter*. It's quiet but chilling, nothing like the vague amusement that he'd shown earlier. He almost recalls the same exact laughter being put on display during the final explosions at the Banquet, but he cannot be certain.

*This*, Techno does realise, staring at the man's shaking shoulders, *Is what he's really like. No more stage smiles or pretend allyships. It's finally you that I'm meeting, Dream. The real one.*

It takes Techno all but two seconds to realise that this isn't a blessing. Distantly, he's reminded of the old Greek tale about the original god of love and his wife who he'd never let see his face; when she finally had, she was sentenced to death.

"He's won," Techno whispers, standing up straight in horror. There is no time to act, no time to threaten Dream from moving another inch, none of it. Because this was his plan, all of it had been, and he's *won*.

Techno barely catches Niki's frantic "*What does that mean?*" before he's turning on his heel, prying open the door with the highest scent, and running down the steps.

Over his shoulder, he hisses out a, "*Hold onto him!*" towards Jack. He can only hope that his friend gets the message, as he does not turn around a second time to see the outcome.

Techno had been certain that he'd be running to his brothers' rescue like some sort of self-acclaimed hero (oh, the irony), but that cannot be the case now. If Dream's won, if the laughter he'd spilled is truly amusement and not that of grief, then they've lost. All of them have.

Techno's footfalls seem to slow the further down the stairs he walks, like he's wading through water. His fear for the worst only seems to strengthen as he continues through the cellar, or basement; whatever it could be called.

The smell of blood inside of the room, now that the door is opened, hits Techno to a degree that he wishes to never know again. The scent of Wilbur's is far more overpowering than that of Tommy's, but they're both still there nonetheless, intermingled in the air in a way that Techno hopes to never feel again. Gods, maybe he should've just stayed behind and not acted on impulse, but he knows that he has to be here.

He has to know. He has to be aware, and he has to make sure that they're alright. (Something tells him that they won't be. Maybe it's the blood, or maybe it's the general look on Dream's blank face that had been a dead give away, but something's wrong. They've lost, but Techno isn't quite sure *how* just yet.)

It feels like the door that had been closed on the cellar had been the very thing keeping in the scent, blocking it off from the rest of the world. Almost like it had been some sort of sick quarantine for Techno's brothers to remain in.

*A quarantine.*

The word makes his stomach churn dangerously.

For a millisecond, Techno almost second-guesses walking the rest of the way into the room, but he knows that he has to. There's a thickening silence in the air, only shattered every other second by a small drip-drop from some unseen leak.

"Tommy?" Techno calls with unease, blinking through the darkness. The only light he receives is that from the open door behind him, but it does very little to show him where anything is. To his left, just a few feet away, he can spot the glittering of metal bars.

The thought of it being a cage of some sort, to entrap someone— to *experiment* on them in the way that he and the rest of the Syndicate have always known occurs in the Complex— is what guides his feet in its direction.

"Tommy, are you in there?" He calls again, not particularly enjoying the dead silence that follows. He hopes to keep his voice as relatively calm as possible, as to not spook Tommy or Wilbur if they are here.

It's a beat before there's a noise, but Techno doesn't feel relieved by it.

A soft sob comes from the cell, putting him on full alert. Without a second of hesitation, Techno's rushing towards the front of the cell, hands already reaching out to wrap around the cold bars. The light from the door doesn't provide much, but if he focuses hard enough, he's certain he can make out the outlines of someone... no, two people.

*Wilbur and Tommy*, his mind supplies, heart racing.

"Hey," Techno whispers, keeping his voice as calm as he can. "Tommy, is that you in there, kid? Are you alright? Is Wilbur in there with you?"

He receives no response.

"Come on, Tommy, you've gotta talk to me," he tries again, knuckles white from how hard he's holding onto the cell bars. "I need to know that it's you in there and not some hero ready to beat my ass or something."

Another soft sob meets his ears, one that sounds distinctly like Tommy's voice. The kid doesn't respond to him— not verbally, anyways— but the cries are enough to twist his heart.

Techno sucks in a breath, leaning his forehead against the cool iron bars. He should've expected that this wouldn't be as easy. If Morpheus of all people is the one that had Tommy, he wouldn't doubt that the kid's harmed, and...

His blood suddenly turns cold.

Wilbur. He hasn't responded to him.

He always responds.

*It's his blood that he can smell the most.*

Techno stands quickly, hands fumbling in the dark for where the lock on the door is. His mind is going a million miles a minute, a part of him hoping for it to not be the worst case scenario. The other part of him, the more logical one, already knows the truth.

Nonetheless, Techno pries the cell door open the second that he finds the lock. It makes a loud creaking noise that Tommy nor Wilbur react to.

He steps into the cell, dropping to his knees in front of the lump that he had originally assumed was a person. The smell of Wilbur's blood is heavy, far more than it had ever been. It fills the air, practically suffocating him.

The sound of footsteps makes Techno flinch, head turning and body already preparing to fight. He calms, though, at the sight of Kristin standing in the dark. He'd recognise her anywhere, light or darkness. He's certain that he's memorised what she looks like when shrouded in it from the amount of times she'd come into his room as a child, always prepared to soothe his nightmares away with a story about a Greek mythological creature and a cup of tea.

There's a rustling sound, and then something clicks on. A flashlight, yellow and bright, shines in Techno's eyes, making him recoil.

When he's finished blinking the black spots away from his eyes, he meets her face again. He wishes that he hadn't.

Techno follows her line of sight to the lump behind him, fear making a hollow centre in his chest.



Sitting together, arms wrapped around each other, are his brothers. Tommy has his face planted in the crook of Wilbur's neck, arms so tight around the man's back that Techno's certain he'd have to be pried off with a crane.

That, however, isn't what Kristin is looking at.

Just in the center of Wilbur's back, sticking out like a sore thumb, is the handle of a sword.

Techno would recognise the design anywhere: the smiley-face engraved just near the edge of the handle, the way the blade that hasn't gone completely through his twin brother's torso glows in arrays of purples and blacks.

Techno turns away from the sight, stomach twisting.

He's going to be sick.

---

Phil arrives at the Hero Complex just after Kristin, Niki, and Jack had.

He had just barely gotten downstairs in time to catch Jester and hitch a ride in the back of his car towards the Hero Complex. Sam had already piled into the back of the car, much to Phil's disappointment, but he grit his teeth through it.

Killing Sam wouldn't do anything to help him find Tommy. If anything, it'd only make it worse when he *does* eventually find Tommy— from what he knows, the boy idolises the man despite what he's done— and technically, it would be against Phil's own moral compass. *And* the integrity of the Syndicate, which only vowed to kill when absolutely necessary (which was literally never), but still.

"Phil," Niki sounds breathless, as though she's been fighting. She tucks a strand of pink hair behind her ear, eyebrows pinched with worry. "I don't know what the *hell* is going on, but Kristin and Techno ran into one of the basements and haven't come up yet. I would've gone to check, but I'm helping Jack make sure that Morpheus doesn't get away."

Phil grimaces, glancing over his shoulder. Jester and Charlie look rather out-of-place in this hallway, sheepishly looking at everything. Sam, however, keeps his eyes trained on the floor.

As much as he would rather not converse with the Warden again after their most recent discussion ending the way it had, he knows that he has no choice.

"Warden," Phil calls, not even waiting for the former hero to look up at him before continuing. "Help Niki and Jack keep Morpheus at bay. Jester, Charlie- make sure that no other heroes try to get in here. I have family business to attend to and by the *Gods*, nobody follows me."

He doesn't finish the threat, and he doesn't need to.

Without pausing for a response from anyone, Phil whirls around on his heel and enters the basement that Niki had motioned to.

He sees part of the scene before he even makes it halfway down the stairs.

A flashlight is discarded on the ground in the doorway of what looks to be a jail cell, which would usually be enough to make Phil's knees buckle on its own. The light illuminates what's inside of the cell, but Phil can't quite put his finger on what's going on. All he's certain of is that someone is whispering something and that it sounds very much like Kristin.

It's with zero hesitation whatsoever that Phil scrambles his way towards the cell. He'd originally planned to pick up the flashlight on the way to get a better look at what's going on, but he stops dead in his tracks when he gets a clearer picture of who is sitting inside of it.

The first person that he recognises is Technoblade, hunched near the front of the jail cell with his hand over his mouth and head resting against the bars. He looks gravely ill, skull mask discarded to the side and face a pale sheet of white.

The next person— or rather, people— that Phil sees is the two that are pressed up against one another.

Phil would recognise the back of Wilbur's villain cloak anywhere; an elaborate design of a silver painted moon. He'd never forget the sight of Tommy's blonde curls, pink at the tips from where the red was slowly losing its colour, pressed up against the man's neck. Just beside the two of them, mouthing words under her breath hurriedly, is Kristin.

What he sees next feels like slow motion. It should've been the first thing that his line of sight went to, as it is the most obvious, but somehow it hadn't. Even in the time of peril, he hadn't spotted the thing that would cause his downfall.

(His downfall— as though the rest of his family weren't sitting only feet away. Funny how it works that way. Funny how family can find one another, even in times that equvalate to grieving.)

Sticking out of Wilbur's back is a sword. Morpheus's sword.

He has half a mind to pull it out and chuck it across the cell immediately, but he controls himself. Not only would it most likely harm him both physically and psychologically, but he's more than certain that the blade of it could potentially catch Tommy on the way out.

"Kristin," is the first thing that Phil says, dropping to his knees at the entrance. She barely acknowledges him, continuing to mutter something. "Kristin, please—"

"You need to help me get him to move," Kristin interrupts, eyes snapping to Phil's. A confirmation passes through them, a silent *'I'll do this, but you need to help me first.'*

Phil blinks sluggishly, suddenly feeling like he's drunk. He follows Kristin's head motion to where Tommy is once more. The boy's arms are wound so tight around Wilbur that Phil is certain that if Wilbur were alive, he'd be making those fake choking sounds he does whenever Tommy or Techno hug him too hard.

A rush of cold brushes over Phil's head, eyes suddenly burning. He knows that this won't last long, that Wilbur's death is nothing but a temporary setback with Kristin on hand, but he can't help but already feel as though he's lost him. As if he's standing over his gravestone, reminiscing on the times that they used to know, on the man that his son once used to be.

Phil feels himself stand, legs moving without much thought. It's like he's on autopilot. His thoughts are screaming at him, but his body moves as though it cannot hear his brain.

"Tommy," he whispers the boy's name silently, putting his hand down onto the top of the kid's curls with as much gentleness as he can. A few tears slip loose from his eyes, burning a trail down his face. "Tommy, you- you need to move, kiddo."

The boy jerks his head away, fingers digging into the fabric of Wilbur's jumper. It's here in the light that Phil can see something he's never seen on Tommy before; antennae stick out from blonde-and-pink curls, matching moth wings resting on his back.

Phil has to take a moment to remember how to breathe. *One thing at a time*, he tells himself as his own wings flutter in pain at the sight, *one thing at a time*.

"Come on, Tommy," Phil tries again, hoping his voice doesn't sound too choked up. "We- we need to move him. You could hurt yourself."

He hadn't expected Tommy to respond, so the next words coming from the kid's mouth make him flinch.

"No, I'm not- I can't leave him!" The kid's voice is hoarse, as though he's been screaming. Then, it quiets, morphing into a broken whisper. "I can't *leave* him. He- we *pinky promised*, Phil, *I can't leave him*."

If there hadn't been a swirling hole dissolving most of whatever made up Phil's chest, then there is now. He chokes back whatever sound had threatened to peel from his mouth.

"I know, I know. It's alright," Phil placates the boy, warily moving his hand back down onto Tommy's hair. "You won't leave him, Tommy, I promise. We just have to move him, okay? Get that nasty thing out of his back and..."

His breath catches in his throat and he turns to Kristin. She catches his eye, a mutual agreement being passed through the two once more. He was already certain that she'd do this, and it made his stomach churn. She should've never had to do this again, especially not for one of her own children.

Yet, here she is, and here they are: all by one person's hand. How that had even happened, Phil couldn't fathom. Instead of trying to decipher it, he clears his throat for the third time and turns back to Tommy.

"Tommy, do you remember what happened to you?" Phil begins, kneeling down beside the boy. He hasn't moved an inch, not even to look at the man. He continues to talk anyways, clinging to the hope that Tommy is possibly listening. "Someone told me about what you went through. How you... died, and then Morpheus revived you."

Tommy's shoulders tense. Phil knows how insensitive it truly is to be discussing Tommy's own death while his brother— and Phil's *son*— lies dead in his arms, but he fears it may be the only way to get through to him.

Taking a breath, Phil puts his hand over Kristin's, which still rests against Tommy's back.

"Remember when I told you about my wife? About Kristin?" Again, he doesn't wait for an answer to keep speaking. "I might have lied to you a little. She's not exactly the Goddess of Death, but she *is* Blessed by Her. With that blessing comes a curse, but also a reprieve: revival."

Tommy doesn't move, so Phil continues.

"If you let Wilbur go and we take that *thing* out of him," he spits the word out with venom, then breathes in deep. He can't get angry, not now. That was reserved for later. *Much* later. "Kristin can try to bring him back, just like how you were brought back. You just have to let go and step back, alright, kiddo? You won't have to leave his side, you won't have to go anywhere. I swear it to you."

For a moment, Phil's certain that he isn't going to get a response again, and then Tommy moves. It's slow and unsure, but in a second, his face is peeking out from over his shoulder to see the man. His eyes are tinged red and dull, as though *he* is the one who's died instead of Wilbur.

A heavy burden it must be, to see one's own brother die.

The words *Wilbur* and *dead* ring in Phil's head again, bringing another stream of bile up his throat, but he pushes it away. Kristin's here, she can bring him back. It'll be okay.

"I don't have to leave him?" Tommy whispers, staring at Phil. His arms are still interlocked around Wilbur's back, completely content with never letting go.

Phil shakes his head, offering a strained smile.

"No, kid, you just—" he gasps a little, coughing to hide a sob. "You just have to move so that Kristin can get to him, okay? Techno and I will take care of you. We'll make sure that you're safe, and that Wilbur's safe. You can be by his side the whole time, just at a bit of a distance while Kristin works." Then, as an add on, even though he's certain Tommy already knows it, "We're all here with you, Toms."

To the right, Technoblade moves for the first time in a while, slowly snapping out of whatever world he'd been lost to at the mention of his name.

Tommy blinks a few times, then turns his head. Phil can't quite see it, but he's certain that the boy's looking at Kristin now.

"You can bring him back?" He whispers. It's the first time that he's meeting Kristin face-to-face, Phil realises with a horrified jolt.

It's truly a sad thing for this to be how they meet, rather than the way he'd pictured it for the past couple of months. All of them, sitting on a blanket at Techno's favourite spot under the willow tree, eating Kristin's famous boxed lunches. He'd never pictured that it would be like *this*, that Tommy's first impressions of her would be of bringing his pseudo brother back from the dead.

Kristin nods, wiping away the tears from her cheeks with the pads of her fingers. She offers the boy as placating a smile as she can manage. Phil wonders if she's thinking the same thing.

"I can," she confirms just as quietly, "But I need to have access to the wound in order to heal him. Would that be alright with you, Tommy?"

At her words, the kid seems to relax greatly. Phil's always envied his wife for having such a way with words, weaving them in a way that can make anyone feel comforted. He supposes, though, that would be a trait Wilbur had picked up. He decides not to think about it.

Tommy sniffs, arms slowly unwinding themselves from where they'd been around Wilbur. He sways a bit in the weight that Wilbur's got leaning against him— *deadweight*; a word that makes Phil feel sick again— before slowly scrambling out of his arms.

Tommy collides halfway to the corner with Techno, who reaches out to catch him and tug him tight to his chest.

(Phil's eldest son hasn't said a word this entire time, mouth pressed shut. He typically got that way in these types of situations; rather than fumble over his words and pour out a symphony of heart wrenching ballads like Wilbur normally would, he went completely silent. Lost in his own thoughts, drowning in whatever it is that keeps his mouth from moving.)

The second that Tommy is pressed into Techno's arms and no longer in Wilbur's, the latter slumps forwards with the loss of something to lean on to.

In an act that mirrors Techno's own, Phil and Kristin are there in time to catch their son from completely toppling forwards. It makes something uncomfortable twist in Phil's stomach to be holding Wilbur, his son, his dead son, in his arms. He'd promised himself that he never would have to clutch a loved one close as they die again, and yet here he is. Albeit, this time, they're already gone.

Kristin's breath hitches as she presses Wilbur's forehead to her shoulder, holding him close but not enough that the sword through his ribs can touch her. With her head positioned on the back of his curls, and eyes clouding over, she turns to Phil. The scene is vaguely reminiscent of the last time they'd seen one another, and Wilbur had nestled his head into Kristin's shoulder as a goodbye.

With a breath, Phil turns away. He already knows what he has to do, but it doesn't make it any better. With creaking bones that would normally make his sons bully him for being old (but they're silent as the sea at rest), he moves to stand behind Wilbur.

His eyes train on the sword's handle, on the engravings that alone could dub who it belongs to.

He'd never imagined that he'd be in this position, one that makes it feel almost as though *he* was the one who had killed his own son.

Slowly, like a child having to rip off a bandaid, Phil wraps his hands around the handle. A chill runs up his spine. He feels terribly ill and his hands begin to shake. He can't so much as meet Kristin's eyes again, not like this. Not while he's standing behind their son, clutching the sword that killed him, and suddenly feeling like it had been him who had put the blade between Wilbur's ribs again.

He knows it's fake, that the way his mind is thinking is nothing but a trick of his own brain being drowned in grief, but his lungs fill with metaphorical water anyways.



Swallowing thickly, Phil shuts his eyes, and pulls.

The sword slides out of Wilbur like it had never even been there in the first place. Phil tosses it aside, the metal and obsidian making a loud *clang!* against the cement floors. He sees Tommy flinch into Techno's arms out the corner of his eye, and his eldest son clutch him even closer.

He knows that they'll never recover from this. That there will be endless nights of Techno waking up from nightmares and throwing on his cape before heading out onto the streets, or of Kristin calling him up shaking on the phone to make sure that her children are alright. It's only inevitable. It's happened before, and it'll happen again.

Phil steps aside when Kristin moves to settle Wilbur on his back, laying across the cell floor. His head lulls to the side, eyes shut. His face is filled with serenity, as though he'd died peacefully rather than been murdered at the hand of someone that Phil had once thought to be a potential ally. How wrong he'd been.

His midsection still bleeds, staining the jumper he wears underneath his villain cloak and his own hands. Instinctively, Phil rubs his own palms roughly against his jeans, hoping that the red there will one day come out. (To live a life of killing only to find the blood on his hands comes from his family, from his son, rather than a foe, is the most dramatic awakening that Phil's ever had.)

"I don't think we're going to be able to do it in here," Kristin breathes, looking up to catch Phil and Techno's eye. "It would be best for me and for him if we brought him back home, where it's safe."

*And there isn't the stench of something rotting around* goes unsaid, but Phil winces as though he'd heard it.

"We're gonna have to move him," he whispers aloud, turning his head to Techno. His eldest son is still clinging tight to Tommy, arms wrapped around the boy's torso and chin settled heavily atop his curls— protective, but not entirely constricting. "Techno, can you take Tommy?"

Techno doesn't respond, merely giving Phil a quick glance before slowly standing from off of the ground. His arms easily adjust to hold Tommy tight to his side, like the kid's a toddler rather than sixteen years old.

In another world, the sight would be amusing to Phil, and detrimental to Tommy. The kid would throw a fit. In this one, Phil simply inclines his head towards his son and whispers, "Go. We'll be right behind you."

It's with a flurry that Techno turns on his heel, Tommy cradled to his chest. He shoots one last look at his twin brother before he's heading out of the cellar. Phil knows that, if he wasn't carrying Tommy, that he'd be lost— that Dream would be dead where he stood in the hallway, and Techno's mind would be somewhere that isn't even close to *here*.

The joke that Wilbur had told of Tommy being like an anchor to his family suddenly doesn't feel like much of a joke anymore.

Even though Phil is certain that Tommy hasn't said much of a single word since he had shot off into Techno's arms, he knows that it's coming. For now, he is silent, ridden with some form of guilt or denial— not much unlike Phil himself, but he pushes the thought away— but it's coming.

If Tommy *is* Theseus, something's going to happen. For better or worse, Phil isn't quite sure yet.

"Phil," Kristin's voice cuts through his thoughts and he turns, reality seeping into his bones at the sight of his son lying dead on the floor again. Her eyes carry a silent plea, something on the borderline of desperation. "I can't do this by myself."

It's nostalgic in the worst way possible.

Phil swallows bile and nods, walking forwards. He bends down beside Wilbur, arms positioning themselves under his son's torso.

“I can carry him,” he tells her quietly, hoping that his placating tone brings her comfort. Or maybe, it’s for himself. He couldn’t tell. “Go on ahead and be sure that Niki and Jack keep Morpheus apprehended. I don’t want anyone to see Wil.”

Kristin nods, hands fumbling with themselves. She looks completely out of her element. Phil wishes that her welcoming party had been something other than this— a funeral for her son, and for not obliging the curse for far too long.

“Hey,” Phil reaches forwards, offering a strained smile in the darkness. He takes her hand in his, brushing his thumb against her knuckles. “It’s going to be okay. I promise. This is the last time.”

“Gods, I hope so,” Kristin mumbles in return, her free hand reaching up to brush through her wild mess of hair. Phil does his best not to flinch at the sight of the white strands intertwined with the black. “You’ve got Wil?”

Phil nods.

“I’ve got him if you can make sure the hallway is cleared.” He pauses to swallow thickly. “I don’t think he’d— uhm, I don’t think he’d like it if anyone saw him like this. It’s...”

“Dishonouring,” Kristin returns the thin-lipped smile. After giving it a knowing squeeze, she lets go of Phil’s hand and stands with a flourish. “He always was embarrassed if anyone saw him at his weakest, wasn’t he?”

Phil laughs wetly, bending his head. He refuses to cry, not here; not now. Perhaps later, when Wilbur’s walking around and breathing, he can grieve for the son he could’ve lost, but didn’t. For now, he’s going to have to keep a level head.

“I guess that’s why he was so magnetised to Tommy,” Phil whispers, shaking his head lightly. “The two are so similar. It’s a shock that they’re not biologically related.”

Kristin hums a sad noise, walking towards the entrance of the cell. Her steps are wavering, as though her legs are about to give out from underneath her again. Phil silently prays to the Goddess that's Blessed her to help guide her.

As though she'd heard his prayer, Kristin turns and presses her hand against the top of Phil's head as though to say *thank you*.

"I'll see you when you get home." Kristin whispers, removing her hand from Phil's head. He'd be lying if he said that he didn't miss the comfort that it brought.

"Home." Phil simply confirms under his breath, voice still choked with a grievance he won't let out.

He waits until the sound of heels against concrete is gone before he heaved Wilbur up and into his arms, head tucked against his shoulder. It's a bit awkward of a carry with just how *tall* his son's gotten, but Phil knows that there could never be a time for his child to be too old to be carried.

He can vaguely recall a time when Wilbur had been younger, back when he loved for Phil to carry him around the house.

It hadn't mattered where or when to Wilbur. Whether it was from the kitchen to the dining room, or from the back car seat all the way to his bedroom, he wanted to be carried there.

When Techno eventually grew tall and strong enough, he'd sometimes carry his twin as well.

Phil decides not to think too hard about it, or about how it could've been just about *any* of his sons in his arms instead of just Wilbur. The thought makes him sicker than he already feels.

If he hadn't been as early as he was, or if Niki and Jack had been just a few minutes late... all three of his sons could've died, and there would be nothing he could do about it.

To Death, three's a crowd. To Phil, three's a number forever pressed into his back, a reminder of family tied by the binds of fate.

When Phil reaches the empty hallway of the Complex that feels like it stretches just a little too far, and the lights have begun to flicker from Jack undoubtedly overusing his powers, his throat closes for the fourth time.

Rather than let it consume him, he holds his head up and marches onwards. Wilbur wouldn't want him to cry, so he contains it once more, keeping the constant mantra of *later* in his head to hold him steady.

Phil's feet are heavy against the porcelain flooring, echoing loudly against the empty corridor. It's surreal, in a way. Then again, *all* of this has been almost otherworldly.

Working with allies that had once been enemies, entering the one place in all of Manberg that is the most obvious place that a supervillain shouldn't go, and— Phil's thoughts come to a halt, veering off in the opposite direction.

Thinking about Wilbur will only make it worse and the harrowing memory that he's dead— *that his son is dead, right here in his arms*— will begin to stick to him like glue, rather than the ones of him when he had been alive.

The moment that Phil's outside into the brisk, cold air, he can feel the eyes on him. Tubbo and Ranboo have arrived; he can see them both tripping over one another in a desperate attempt to try and speak with him. Behind them, he catches Niki's eye.

He tries not to think about the slow crumbling look of anguish crossing her face at the sight of Wilbur, or how Jack is already reaching out to wrap his arms around his sister.

Far off, Phil can see Charlie's eyes widen a fraction. His boss and Sam are nowhere to be seen. Phil hopes that means Jester has taken Morpheus elsewhere with Sam. He doesn't have time to worry about what it could mean otherwise.

Without another second of hesitation, Phil spreads his wings and takes off into the sky. The calls of his name coming from Tubbo and Ranboo fall on deaf ears.

The air is far colder up high, with the snow catching at Phil's clothes and sticking in his hair. He wonders if Wilbur would like it. Unlike Techno, he'd always had a fascination with being up high enough to look over the entire city, or see where the sun hit the horizon just right.

When he was a child, Phil used to take him flying all the time. It used to bring Wilbur the same type of fascination as being carried around did, which was rather funny.

That was back when things were simpler, though. They lived in the country, at the very heart of the woods, where things like strange looks from neighbours or the newscasters announcing the identities of the Syndicate weren't something to worry about.

If he listens closely enough, Phil can almost hear it; the sound of Wilbur yelling in joy, a childish gleam in his eyes at the mere excitement of being in the air with his father. He would point out how all the trees looked like little plastic toys rather than real. Sometimes, he'd even wave at other birds. That all ended far too abruptly when they'd had to move to Manberg and when Kristin had died the very first time.

Wilbur wasn't the only one who had changed that day.

Letting out a shaky breath, Phil desperately tries to think of something else. *Anything* else.

He wishes that the heavy static of the wind brushing against his ears would help distract him in a way, or make him think about anything that isn't correlated to the son hanging limp in his arms, but nothing comes.

With only the cold moon bringing Phil company, he swallows thickly and allows the thoughts to consume him.

---

*A train passes, loud and blaring. When it rushes past the sea of shadows, whispers of a person's last breath taken, very few can feel its air currents.*

*Nobody gets on, not ever. The train is a constant reminder of being stuck in a place that one cannot leave, of deeds left unfinished and promises unkept.*

*In an ocean of lost souls, Wilbur silently wonders if the next one will be coming for him.*

## Chapter End Notes

hi hello <3 i'm not off of my hiatus, but it is one of my best friend's birthdays today so :D cinder, this one's for you <3 ilysm!!!! i hope u have the best birthday ever king ^ \_ ^

this is the longest chapter of this fic that i've ever written hakshksjd. i forgot the wc but it's over 20k, massive boi. i hope u enjoy :)

also! before i go, we've got more fanart :D this one is from the lovely yammanatee on twitter! cw for MCD & some blood, but go [look at this](#) ASAP & send some love to the artist >:D !!! (it's of crimeboys from last chapter giggles evilly.) it's soooo fucking good, i could stare at it for *hours*. artist, i absolutely adore ur art. absolutely phenomenal, thank you sm <3 :D

on that note, i'll head out. stay safe everyone <3 im not sure when the next chapter will come out (i've just started back school & im still keeping this fic on hiatus), but yeaahhh!! i hope you're all doing well out there :) love ya /p

# it takes a lot to move me

## Chapter Summary

"You're family," Techno whispers into his hair, point-blank. Tommy can hear the way his throat clogs, and how he sounds on the verge of tears. It's not something that Tommy's ever heard from the man before, but it only makes him hug him tighter; amongst other things. "You're family, Tommy. We're going to be okay. We'll figure this out, kid. We always do."

or, everyone's coping & we do this funky thing called speedrun grief

## Chapter Notes

once again reiterating that this story will be dealing with the aftermath of death & what it's like to grieve. please keep this in mind and stay safe <3 if you choose to not read, as always, there will be a summary in the comments.

**tw:** major character death, grief, panic attacks & derealisation, talk of blowing shit up (it doesn't actually happen tho), morally grey characters (its heavily shown in this one) & mentions to past character death as well <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Wilbur can't breathe.*

*He knows that he shouldn't have to, that with dying comes no form of consciousness, but it feels like he needs to.*

*He tries to suck in a breath, numb fingertips digging into the center of his chest, but nothing comes.*



*Alarms blare, and wind blows against his face. It's cold and dusty, and it doesn't feel like wind at all.*

*The station rocks beneath him as the train passes, and he almost wants to reach his hand out to beg it to come back, but he knows that it won't.*

*Something clatters, and he startles, head swivelling. It isn't unnatural to hear weird sounds here, especially with the distant rambling of people that he can never discern from anything but the shadows that flood around him.*

*There, in the distance, he sees it; the growing amalgamation that he's desperately tried to ignore.*

*Swallowing thickly, Wilbur turns away from it, and clamps his hands over his ears.*

*If he tries hard enough, maybe he can remember what it's like to be alive again.*

---

Hannah had thought she'd seen carnage before, but really, it is close to nothing compared to what she catches sight of in front of the Hero Complex.

Well, she figures that the Banquet takes the cake for the worst damage she's ever seen, but this seems different in the varying levels of chaos. She isn't even sure that's the correct word for it — maybe *peculiarity*?

In truth, Hannah had no clue what was in store for her when she arrived at the front of the Complex.

Of course, she knew that something had to be up for Quackity to request her and Purpled's presence at the one place in all of Manberg they strayed from like a cat to water, but she hadn't quite expected this.

Tubbo had parked the car— crashed was a better word, really— on the side of the street.

Although the front headlights are now permanently damaged from him ramming the front of it into the Complex's side wall (and pretty much guaranteeing a few months in a jail cell), Hannah had to compliment the kid on getting them there fast.

She supposed, though, that she and Purpled weren't the only ones that wanted to get to the Complex as quickly as possible.

Ranboo and Tubbo had thrown the car doors open before she could even process the true damage of the car they'd taken, quick on their feet and bickering all the way towards the Complex itself.

Hannah shot Purpled a short and mildly exasperated look that his own expression matched— deadpan but with the slightest wrinkle between the brows— before exiting the vehicle herself.

The first thing she notices before the entire place erupts into yelling back and forth is the crowd gathered around the front.

It bothers her slightly that she can't spot any of the Syndicate members with them, not Tommy. It gives her a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that she tries to ignore. Maybe they're inside, fighting with Morpheus or another one of the heroes?

Hannah only makes it a few more steps towards the front entrance when it happens.

Quackity bursts through the front door with the Warden, both of them dragging someone incredibly familiar between the both of them. Nemesis and Dimensional are quick on their

heels, barking orders about what to do with this scum.

Hannah nearly knocks Purpled down with how quickly she backs up out of the way of her boss and the former hero, shoulders hunched upwards and eyebrows raised high.

Purpled follows close beside her, stumbling backwards when her shoulder connects with his arm. His eyes follow the sight of Quackity and the Warden moving through the small crowd of people that had once fit all inside of Phil's living room.

"Hannah," Purpled begins in a hushed voice, and she already knows what he's about to say, although she doesn't believe it much herself quite yet. "Is that who I think it is?"

"Morpheus," Hannah speaks the name into existence, pretty much confirming that this is in fact not a dream and very much reality. "Yeah, pretty sure. Maybe you should pinch me so I can make sure that Tubbo didn't crash the car on the way here and now we're stuck in some type of limbo-like plane."

Purpled snorts, but it's not as humour-filled as it usually is.

It's incredibly strange, really, to watch as Morpheus does little to nothing to struggle against the Warden and Quackity's grasps on him. He barely moves his feet to try and walk, allowing his legs to be dragged against the cement as though he's already dead; which can't be true.

Can it?

"They're gonna take him somewhere," a voice says from behind her, nearly startling her enough to send her sprawling into Purpled again.

She turns, her breathing beginning to even out when she sees the slime hybrid standing there. His eyes are unreadable.

"Take him where?" Purpled asks before she can lecture Charlie about jumpscaring her like that again. "Is he-?"

"He's not dead," Charlie confirms, crushing Hannah's dreams ever so slightly. "Just knocked out." Ah, well, that explains the dragging thing, then. "He won't be for long, though. They're gonna try to figure out what to do with him at Las Nevadas."

Hannah reels back, "They're taking him to Las Nevadas?"

Charlie nods, lips pursed. She knows that he's thinking the same thing that she is, even though he doesn't mention it.

"They're gonna put him in the basement and figure out what to do with him there. Maybe run a trial or something," he shrugs nonchalantly, looking a bit more tired than usual. Hannah's never seen him this... non-energetic. "I don't know. But you have to go now."

"What's the rush?" Purpled pipes up, sounding suspicious. "What the hell even happened, Charlie? We just got here, man, we need some answers. I thought that the point of coming here was that we found Tommy or something."

"We did," Charlie says simply, making Hannah and Purpled glance at one another. That's the goal that they'd had this entire time; why does it sound lesser now? "He's okay. He's in good hands, just- help Quackity and them, please? They'll explain everything on the way home."

Home, Hannah thinks bitterly. The very last place that I'd ever want to bring a psychotic murderer that thinks he's a hero.

"What will you do?" She asks, shifting on both of her feet.

Charlie shrugs, "Dunno. Quackity told me to wait to make sure that Tommy's alright before following him to Las Nevadas."

"You just said that he's 'in good hands'," Purpled frowns, crossing his arms over his chest. Normally, he'd follow Quackity's orders immediately, but Hannah knows that look on his face; he's never been keen on listening to Charlie. It isn't that he doesn't trust him— they know that they owe their lives to the guy.

"The Syndicate won't hurt him," Charlie explains, tapping his palms together the way he does when slightly anxious. "That doesn't mean Quackity trusts them, though."

Hannah nods curtly, still uncertain. "You'll be coming home soon, though?"

Charlie gives her a cheerful, Charlie-esque grin. "As soon as I can! Hopefully I can bring Tommy with me."

Don't know if that one will work out, Hannah thinks bitterly, remembering the dark look on Archangel's face when this first had come to be. But you can surely try.

Letting out a huff and shaking the thought off, Hannah turns to tug on Purpled's arm, who's still stuck in place. He's glaring up at the Complex as he always does when they pass by it while driving, mouth downturned and eyes piercing.

"Come on," she mutters irritably, trying to drag him towards the black limo that Quackity must've taken here. "You won't get anything out of storming the place and you know it. Our place is with Quackity."

"It'd be fun," Purpled responds darkly. There's something more to his words, something that makes Hannah want to reconsider her options here— because really, it could be interesting to bring the entire building down now that they've finally got the chance, with Morpheus under Quackity's supervision and all— but it's not right.

Jesus. Maybe having Tommy around was bad after all. He'd really given them a slap in the face sort of morality lesson after the Banquet.

"Putting you in a grave wouldn't be fun," Hannah merely spits in response, pushing him towards one of the open back doors. "Get in the car. We can get rid of it later."

Grumbling, Purpled slides into the back seat and slams the door shut behind him. Before entering herself, Hannah turns around to give Charlie one last look.

"Text me updates," she tells him sharply. "Don't leave anything out or else I'll come driving right back here, Charlie, and there'll be hell to pay."

Charlie, always unphased, shoots her another semi-reassuring smile. "Okay, Hannah. See you at home."

Hannah clenches her jaw. Swiftly, she turns on her heel and pulls the car door open wider, muttering under her breath as she enters. "Yeah. At home."

—

"Where the fuck are they?"

Ranboo winces, recoiling a bit as he watches his friend pace back and forth in front of him.

"I don't know," he responds, wringing his hands together. "But Nemesis told us not to go inside. She doesn't want us getting potentially ambushed by heroes that could be hiding in the walls or something."

Tubbo rolls his eyes, pausing in his tracks to smack Ranboo in his ribs. "There are no heroes hiding in the fuckin' walls, boss man. She only said that to distract us. Tommy could be in there, right now, and there's nothing that we're doing about it because you believe that there are little termites crawling around in the ceiling n' shit."

"You're starting to sound like him," Ranboo points out nervously. "Like Tommy. You're sounding like him again."

Tubbo doesn't say anything, but his face contorts like he's tasted something sour.

Rather than rebuttal with something, or even argue Ranboo's point, he simply says, "If they're not out here in ten minutes, I'm going to blow up this entire place to hell and back. No questions asked."

Ranboo laughs with unease, quickly reaching forwards to snatch the explosive device out of Tubbo's hands. He'd already been on the verge of getting sick on the car ride here holding onto the thing—he was entirely sure that it was going to blow up right in his face with the amount of times Tubbo threw him into the car door and the center console— but he's sort of wishing that it had then instead of here.

"We aren't blowing anything up," he makes another grab for the device, but Tubbo smacks his hands away with a sharp look. "Tubbo. We aren't blowing the Hero Complex up."

"Why not?" Tubbo complains, stepping out of the way when Ranboo tries to make another attempt to take the explosive from his hands. "That's why I built it. Wanted to give them a taste of their own medicine with that shit they pulled—"

"Tubbo," Ranboo exhales, dragging his hand down his face. "The Red Banquet was orchestrated by Jester. If you're pissed off at someone, direct it towards that guy."

Tubbo elbows him in the ribs, making him wince.

"I'm not talking about the fuckin' Banquet," he seethes. "I'm talking about Tommy and you and me. They've been pulling shit towards us for years. The Hero Complex is built on lies, boss man. I doubt anyone would be unhappy to see it finally burst into flames. Really, I'd be doing God's work."

"Tubbo," Ranboo reaches out to put his hands onto his friend's shoulders in an attempt to ground him back to reality; to try and speak to him through whatever it is he's currently lost in. "We aren't exploding the building in the center of Manberg. Do you know how many people live around here? We'd be killing all of them. We aren't having innocents die for the sake of your cause. That would make us just as bad as they are."

Tubbo narrows his eyes at him, but doesn't argue. He must realise that Ranboo's right— as he typically is— because he lets out a deep exhale and finally drops the explosive into Ranboo's palm.

"Fine," he grumbles tiredly, crossing his arms. "We won't blow the Complex up. But if the Syndicate come out of that building and Tommy's hurt, then I'm hijacking a helicopter and dropping the bomb on Las Nevadas instead. Four birds, one stone."

The thought makes Ranboo grimace, but he doesn't make an attempt to argue with his friend any further. He knows, deep down somewhere, that Tubbo wouldn't go through with it; as demented as he can get, Ranboo doubts that he'd kill someone.

Partially relieved to now be holding the explosive, Ranboo relaxes against one of the walls outside of the Complex and rubs the space between his eyes.

It would be a lie if they said that they weren't a little pissed off about this ordeal.

The Syndicate might be Tommy's friends— family, he supposes, with the way that all three members had looked when they'd spoken about him— but so is he. So is Tubbo, and everyone else that's pretty much dropped everything else to help look for the kid that had once just been a mutual friend and now is something so much more.

Ranboo isn't a confrontational person, but they might fix that if it means giving a few select people a piece of their mind once all is said and done.

The words leave his mouth before he even registers what they even are.



"Tubbo, do you remember what you told me back at Phil's?"

Tubbo halts, looking back at him. "Which part?"

Ranboo swallows, leaning his head back so that he can think properly.

"All of it, I guess?" His voice tilts, and he exhales a puff of cold air. "I don't know. I'm sorry, I'm- I'm a little bit on edge, I guess. Don't know what's going on, why we were called here and Tommy's not..." he trails off, shoulders slumping. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

There's a short pause, and Tubbo puts his hand on Ranboo's forearm. "It's alright."

Is it? Ranboo wonders, watching a snowflake dissolve on the tip of his shoe.

As though the universe had heard his question, the doors to the Complex fling open, startling the both of them.

Techno's striding out the front door, face twisted with an emotion that Ranboo can't quite place. His mask has been discarded; hell, nearly everything about him has been put to the side, and Ranboo can't help but be partially grateful that this scenario has happened at night.

He starts to walk towards the man, questions bubbling in his throat, with Tubbo right at his heels. They both pause, though, when Techno barely pays any of them mind and uses one arm to open the door to a car nearby. If it belongs to him, Ranboo isn't certain; it must, though, from the way he looks so at ease with navigating towards it.

Ranboo flinches when the man nearly rips the back door off of its hinges. That's going to be a fun price to pay when taxes come around, he thinks, wondering if Phil would tell him off for that.

He watches as Techno bends down and puts something into the back seat of the car, muttering something under his breath. It's a strange sight to see and it would make Ranboo laugh if he wasn't so certain that the thing Techno's placing down is Tommy.

Tubbo must be thinking the same thing because his shoulders tense up and he immediately speedwalks in the direction of the car, fully intent with giving the villain a piece of his mind to ignore what the possibility of it all means. Tommy can't be dead; surely that's not what's going on.

Ranboo reaches out to grab onto his friend's shoulder and pull him back, but he doesn't have to. Before either of them can come another foot close to the car, Techno climbs into the front seat and speeds off without a second thought.

Bewildered, and more confused than anything else, Ranboo turns his head to view the expression on Tubbo's face. To say that he looked murderous was an understatement.

Neither of them are able to get a single word in, though, when a scream interrupts whatever tense silence that had filled them beforehand.

On instinct, they spin around, half-expecting to see Dream having returned with everyone that had taken him dead in his path, but it's quite the opposite.

Archangel, followed closely by his wife, are both exiting the Complex. None of the heroes that had been mentioned are after them; nobody's crawling out of the walls or any of the bullshit that now makes Ranboo feel more uneasy than anything.

Phil's wings are wrapped around himself, as though shielding something that's in his arms. Kristin's got the same look on her face that Techno had when he'd walked out of the Complex, but Ranboo can't even see Phil's expression with the wide-brimmed hat spreading a shadow across his face.

They'd thought that it was Kristin who'd screamed at first, but a few feet away from the door, he catches sight of Nemesis standing with her hand pressed to her mouth, horror-stricken. Behind her, Jack stands with his hands gripping her shoulders tightly.

"What the fuck?" Tubbo whispers, words tangled with a mixture of grief and confusion.  
"What the hell is that?"

Phil spreads his wings to their full extent, completely silencing them. Something's hanging limp in his arms, blue and silver cloak trailing towards the ground, but they both only get one glance at it before the Archangel is taking off into the night, leaving their small group and Kristin in his wake.

Tubbo, quick to get over his bewilderment and driven more by his need for answers than the shock of whomever it was Phil was holding, swiftly rounds on Kristin instead.

"What the fuck was that?" He demands, following Kristin as she shakily pulls a phone from her pocket. "What the fuck is going on, Kristin? Who—?"

"It was Wilbur," she whispers, not glancing up from her phone. She doesn't say anything more than just that; it was Wilbur. There's no mention of Tommy, or of Techno, and yet Ranboo knows what she means.

Tubbo must hear the strain between her words because he halts, mouth closing shut with a click.

Him nor Ranboo say another word as they watch a car slide up in front of Kristin. A part of Ranboo— one that wants to deny everything that he's heard, to think back to when he was still left in the dark— wants to ask how she'd phoned an Uber that quickly, but he keeps his mouth shut.

When the car pulls away, slinking into the night, Tubbo turns to Ranboo expectantly.

"Still not on board with blowing it up?"

It's a decision that Ranboo, for once, feels perfectly fine making.

"We can't," he shifts on his feet, feeling a surge of confidence that he had been fully certain that only people like Tubbo and Tommy felt. He clears his throat, lifting his chin a little to try and somehow emphasize his point. "We can't, Tubbo. Not yet, anyways."

Tubbo presses his lips into a thin line, looking prepared to argue.

"There are innocent lives at stake here, Tubbo," Ranboo points out in a hiss, gesturing towards the other buildings surrounding the Complex with a sweep of his hand. "If we blow this place up, we could *also* be risking the lives of a dozen citizens in the general vicinity."

Undoubtedly, the people within them have already seen the commotion going on at the Complex and have reported it to the authorities— that including the rest of the heroes— which is only *part* of the reason why Ranboo would really rather get the hell out of here than stand around another second and wait for the rest of the heroes to show up.

"They've probably already evacuated!" Tubbo retorts, frowning. "They know better than to stick around when something's going down at the Complex. Everyone learned a bright lesson after the Banquet happened."

Ranboo stands up straighter at the mention of that. It'll never fail to make them feel completely out of line to speak, even though they had been there to watch the entire building collapse in on itself in heaps of flames.

"It's not worth it, Tubbo," they simply remark, shaking their head. "If Kristin—" he pauses, letting out a breath. "If Kristin implied what she did, then we've got other things to worry about than dismantling the heroes right now. If it's true, and Morpheus somehow got to Wilbur, then we should be there with everyone else right now instead of trying to blow the heart of Manberg to hell and back."

Tubbo huffs, crossing his arms. "We don't know for—"

"Tubbo, *please*," Ranboo begins, reaching forwards to grab their friend by the arms. "I know you're worried about Tommy and about our friends, but you can't stay in this form of denial. You can't go blowing things up just because of this. They all need us, and we're here, five seconds away from getting swarmed by every single hero that's out doing Gods know what. So I suggest you hotwire another car for us to take to Phil's while I drag Niki and Jack away before they get themselves killed too."

Even though he may look a few seconds away from throwing Ranboo into the sun, Tubbo relents. "Fine. Okay. But we are blowing that shithole up at some point."

"When it's safer," Ranboo says with a wince.

"Yeah, yeah. That's not exactly a 'no', so I'll take it."

---

The world feels like it's falling on Tommy's head. Or, maybe, that's just the throbbing pain echoing through his temples and around the band of his skull, but either way it feels incredibly awful.

He can't really focus on it much, though. In truth, Tommy can't focus on anything other than the swaying of the footsteps that carry him and the steady breathing of Techno.

Tommy presses his ear closer to Techno's heart subconsciously, desperate to make sure that his breathing matches the man's.

It's a stupid thing, but it's one of the only things that is keeping Tommy anchored to the ground.

After minutes of walking—or hours, Tommy can't really tell—a warmth brushes across his face. It's distinctly different from the cold, biting wind he'd felt for a few moments, and

incredibly opposite from the blistering heat that he'd been subjected to in what he'd assumed was Techno's car.

This warmth is nice; calming and full of something incredibly familiar. Nostalgic although he's only known it for a little while, kind even though it shouldn't be.

Tommy only knows it for a few seconds before the world explodes.

Something bursts open and he jolts in Techno's arms, being smacked to reality. His breathing comes in short bursts again, head turning every which way to get sight of what had made that noise.

Techno's arms tighten around him, feet shuffling against creaking wood as though to shelter him from whatever it is, but Tommy struggles in his grasp.

He hears them before he sees them.

“—to the bedroom, Phil, get him upstairs to our room,” the woman is saying, her tone borderline frantic.

Kristin, Tommy realises distantly. He had only just met her, and somehow it feels like he's known her for a long time before then.

Right behind her, Phil enters, and in his arms—

Tommy's throat closes again and he lets out a strangled sob.

“Wilbur,” he tries to call, voice hoarse as he watches Phil carry Wilbur— carry his *brother's* — body up the stairwell. The man's black wings are spread wide, sprinkled with snow.

Tommy tries calling out again, as though hoping that all of this had been some sort of fucked up dream. “*Wilbur!*”

Then the sight is gone, Techno turning completely away and walking quickly into the next room over.

“Go back,” Tommy begs, struggling to glare up at Techno with something stinging in his eyes. He slaps his hands against the man’s shoulders, hoping that’ll get him to put him down or turn back around. “Go *back*, dickhead!”

“Tommy,” Techno tries, a grimace in his words. “Tom-”

“*No!*” Tommy struggles in Techno’s arms, doing anything in his desperate attempt to try and get free so that he can see Wilbur or Phil— *anyone* that’ll do *something*. “You have to go back, I have to see him! I promised that I wouldn’t leave him, I promised he wouldn’t-” he chokes, letting out a strangled noise. “I promised him that he wouldn’t be alone.”

The man must hear something in Tommy’s voice because soon after, he’s gently setting him down onto the floor in the next room over. Tommy wishes that he could remember where he is, or what it is that he’s doing here (a part of him isn’t even sure of who he is anymore, but he sweeps that under the rug to worry about at another time).

He takes a sharp, strangled breath, sitting on the ground propped up on his knees. There’s a cold, wood-like feeling beneath his legs. It’s different from the constantly frigid, almost snowy feeling that had marked itself into his bones back at the cell. Back when—

His throat tightens and he presses his hands against his chest as though he’s fixing to have a heart attack.

His breathing becomes more ragged, edged and quick. His hand presses tighter into the square of his chest, listening to his own heartbeat thump against his palm. He’s alive, but he doesn’t feel like it.

"Jesus," Techno whispers behind him, sounding afraid. Is he afraid? Tommy can't be certain. "Gods, you're— Tommy, hey, it's alright. Breathe."

A hand hovers over his head and Tommy flinches away from it. Without second thought, the hand retracts quickly, spreading a feeling of both relief and despair through Tommy's stomach.

"Sorry," the man apologises. "I won't touch you, but... Tommy, do you think you can tell me five things that you can see?"

What?

Tommy blinks, looking up from the flooring as though in a daze. It's a game of some sort. He doesn't understand it, but plays along anyways.

"Uhm," he swallows, fingers digging into the front of his shirt. He coughs, letting out a strangled sound when he feels a piercing ache in the center of his back. Behind him, he can hear Techno's sharp intake of breath. "I- there's a picture frame on the fireplace. Uhm, there's a snow globe next to it, and holly. There's lots of holly. A garland, I think. And more picture frames. Red wood, dark wood."

"Good," Techno praises, shuffling behind him. "How about four things you can feel? Can you do that?"

Slowly, Tommy nods. Carefully, he uses his hand to press into the floor, registering the different curves in the wood. The dips and turns, the way it feels more expensive than not. His hand moves further and he almost flinches when his fingers meet something soft, like plush with frayed edges.

"Expensive wood flooring," he murmurs. Techno hums. Any other time, he feels like it may be a laugh. "A carpet."



Tommy moves his hand again, inching forwards. He presses it to cool wood, but different; a leg to a table he recognises distantly. "A coffee table, and..." he reaches up, putting his hand against his chest. The routined *thump, thump* doesn't bring him the comfort that it normally would. "My heartbeat."

"Good job," Techno says gently. "Are you back with me, or do you want to continue grounding yourself?"

Tommy shakes his head, leaning forwards so his shoulder presses into the side of the coffee table.

He doesn't really want to remember this place. He doesn't want to remember what it used to be like in Phil's house versus what it's like now; doesn't want to feel like the memory of him sitting with all of them on the sofa watching Ghibli films is something just out of reach, or acknowledge the bright Christmas tree standing in the corner that he had helped decorate.

He just barely remembers the bright laughter that had sounded from Phil and Techno when they'd seen him on Wilbur's shoulders. Wilbur's own laughter feels distant, though, like the wisping of fog disappearing at one's fingertips when walking inside from the cold.

Tommy closes his eyes tight. He doesn't want to know. He doesn't want to feel it. If he does, it'll be like saying goodbye. He's no good at goodbyes. (It still bothers him that he hadn't even had the chance to tell *Wilbur* goodbye).

Fumbling with his hands, Tommy reaches out to grasp the side of the coffee table. His eyes flick around the room as though just realising where he is and what he's doing here. Wilbur. Where is Wilbur?

"He's upstairs," Techno murmurs. Tommy must've said it out loud; yikes. "He's okay, kid. Trust me. Kristin and Phil are both with him right now. He's safe."

Safe. Tommy isn't sure how safe a person is when they're dead.

"He's not *safe*," Tommy hisses out, digging his hand into the corner of the table to try and hoist himself up. His legs scream in protest- and his back isn't any better- but he ignores it. "He's not- *shit, fuck, ow*- he's not *safe*."

Techno shuffles behind Tommy, hands hovering over his shoulders. Not touching, but ready to help him if he is to fall or anything. A flash of warmth echoes through him.

"Tommy," Techno tries, and Tommy can practically hear the grimace on the man's face when his legs won't cooperate with him. "Tommy, hey-"

Tommy's knees give out again, nearly sending him sprawling head-first into the coffee table. On instinct, Techno grabs his shoulders and hauls him backwards, pulling him back into warmth and security.

Almost immediately, Tommy chokes when Techno slowly helps him sit back down and lets go.

"I need to see him." Tommy repeats, eyes flickering away when they catch the light glittering off of the gold, emerald earring covered by a strand of pink hair. "I need- I *need* to see him, Techno, I have to apologise, and—"

Tommy watches the earring gleam against the firelight, enraptured for only a few moments before closing his eyes forcefully. His throat tightens with the sight of it, the memory of how Dream had pretty much planned all of this the second that he'd ripped Tommy's own emerald necklace off back in that dingy flat that Tommy had run off to.

Now, the feeling of an emerald no longer resting against Tommy's chest is almost akin to having a phantom limb, and he puts his hand back over his chest where the emerald would have sat. (It's something he'd had left of Wilbur, and now, just like him, it's gone).

"No, you don't," Techno murmurs. "I know you want to, but the revival process isn't pretty. I accidentally saw part of it once and it's haunting. I don't want that for you."

“But I was so mean to him,” Tommy whispers, pressing his hands to his face, feeling them shake against his eyes. “I promised him I wouldn’t leave him, Techno, I promised. I *promised.*”

“Hey.. hey,” Techno grabs Tommy’s hands, holding them out in front of him. “Look at me.”

Tommy shakes his head, sobs breaking from his throat. His hands shake in Techno’s hold, but there is no struggle against it. Rather, he looks like he’s gravitating towards him—as though Techno’s the only one he has.

At this moment, it’s close to the truth.

Techno takes a deep breath, hoping that Tommy can’t hear the way it wavers. Gently, he squeezes the kid’s hands in his own.

*“Look at me, Theseus.”* He states, watching Tommy’s head snap up at the name, eyes wide.

Tommy’s only heard the name out of Techno’s mouth before now when he’s referring to the actual Greek mythological creature; never when it’s directed to him. Somehow, it feels natural, which scares Tommy all the same.

The man takes another breath, leaning forward to knock his forehead against Tommy’s, the way he’d started doing everytime he sees him. A family thing, he’d said it was; a tradition that each of them did.

A family thing. He thinks of Tommy as family. How he still does— how he ever did, and how he ever could again— is something that Tommy might never understand.

Another choked sound escapes Tommy’s throat when Techno suddenly rests his hand on the center of the kid’s back, keeping their foreheads together.

“Listen to me,” Techno begins gently; quietly. “This isn’t your fault, Theseus. I need you to breathe for me, to focus. Wilbur’s going to be okay. Phil and Kristin will take care of him. But I need to make sure that *you* are okay, too. Understand?”

“He’s—” Tommy begins, but he can’t. He can’t say it.

“I know,” Techno affirms. “I know. It’s not your fault, Tommy. You’re not the one who got him killed. It was his choice to follow you there, and it was his choice to not take back-up or anything. It’s not your fault. None of it is.”

Tommy lowers his head, letting out a strangled breath.

“Dream brought me back,” he whispers, making Techno tense a little. The man must know this, or at least have some idea of it— Theseus is dead according to the rest of the world, with the significant proof sitting right beside the Complex itself— but he hasn’t heard it directly from Tommy’s mouth. “He brought me back after he killed me. He could- he could bring Wil back, too. Maybe if we go back, if we ask *nicely*—”

Techno grimaces at the mere thought, leaning back away from Tommy and onto his haunches.

“I don’t want to owe that- *thing*- any favours,” he responds darkly, giving a slight shudder at the mere thought. Before Tommy can protest, he adds on, “Besides, we don’t need Dream for that.”

Tommy pauses, mouth slightly agape. “What?”

A small, melancholic smile spreads across Techno’s face. It doesn’t reach his eyes, but Tommy feels ever so slightly better all the same. “Remember what Phil said? We have Kristin.”

"But-"

"She's done this before," Techno reassures, "I've seen it. You don't want to, I promise. You don't."

Tommy swallows, eyes catching the emerald swinging from Techno's ear. He closes his eyes, takes a breath, and then all but throws himself into the man's arms.

For a second, he feels like the hug won't be returned, but then Techno lets out a shaky exhale and a familiar warmth surrounds Tommy whole.

"You're family," Techno whispers into his hair, point-blank. Tommy can hear the way his throat clogs, and how he sounds on the verge of tears. It's not something that Tommy's ever heard from the man before, but it only makes him hug him tighter; amongst other things. "You're family, Tommy. We're going to be okay. We'll figure this out, kid. We always do."

—

Phil paces the bedroom, hands continuously weaving through his hair.

On the opposite side, Kristin wrings out a wet towel into a bowl, face pursed with concentration. Phil's always envied his wife for that; the ability to remain completely focused, even in situations like this. Especially in situations like this.

He's never been able to accomplish that level of seriousness, if that was even the correct word for her current stony— but determined— expression.

As much as he's tried, it never seems to work out for him like it does for Techno or Kristin.

This is different, though.

This time, he feels as though it's at least slightly justified, with it being his own son on the bed rather than someone else in their field. He cared no matter who it was— his friends were like his family— but this was Wilbur. This was his son, the boy he'd raised since he was first born, the one that he'd watched grow up alongside his eldest.

Phil knows that he'd react the same, but he also recognises that this is inherently different.

He pauses in his walk, taking a deep breath and pressing his hand to his forehead. His chest heaves with the harsh gasps of air he's trying to intake, like a drowning man desperate to break the surface. The irony of it all is too much to take in- it's too similar to last time that this had happened, and yet so different.

He moves, pressing his palms into the edges of the dresser instead in an attempt to drive some feeling back into them. It'll be okay, he reminds himself. This has happened before, and I should've assumed that it would happen again; Wilbur's reckless, and I should have known.

Behind him, Phil's wings rustle, spooked by the piercing pain directly in the center of his spine. It's a sharp thing, poking like a dagger- as though he'd been the one stabbed in the back rather than his son. Gods, the mere thought makes his stomach churn, a new thing of bile piling up his throat that he's forced to swallow back.

"Phil," Kristin's voice breaks through his mind. He turns, meeting her eyes. She's standing directly beside the bed— their bed; he couldn't walk into Wilbur's bedroom without feeling nauseated— with a wet rag held over their son's forehead. In the warm light of the lamps on the bedside table, Phil can see the white strands tumbling through her curtain of black hair. "It's going to be alright."

Phil smiles weakly, but he can't seem to force the corners of his mouth to upturn any more than a fraction.

"I know," he whispers, voice creaking like the walls in his house. If Tommy and Techno were here— if *Wilbur* were here— they'd probably make fun of him for sounding old.

Once again, he must dig his fingernails into the wood of the dresser to remind himself of where he is.

"I know," he repeats, clearing his throat. "It's just- it's hard."

Kristin returns his smile. Hers doesn't reach her eyes either.

"Breathe," she reminds him gently, looking down to readjust the rag she's placed onto Wilbur's forehead. As softly as wind blowing through leaves, she brushes their son's curls from his eyes. "He's going to be okay."

He is. He will be.

They've done this before. He's going to be okay.

Kristin hums lowly, removing her hand from the cloth. She looks up, making eye contact with Phil once more while putting her palms together slowly.

"Don't let Techno or Tommy in," she instructs, eyes flicking to the door. "They're going to want to, but don't. I-" she purses her lips, something haunted swirling in her eyes. "I don't want them to see the process."

Phil grimaces at the memory. The thought of reconstructing bones, of weaving them back together.

A revival process isn't pretty and his throat closes at the mere thought of subjecting either of his sons to it. It isn't made any better when he remembers that Tommy must know what it's *actually* like; to know what it feels like to be taken apart and put back together again, to have one's soul split into thousands of pieces.

*Gods*, he thinks again, slowly nodding towards his wife and manoeuvring towards the door to block it off. *So much to speak of, so little time.*

"You might want to stand outside," Kristin suggests, voice tight. "They're going to want to break the door down. Remember-?"

Phil sighs, reluctantly running a hand down the side of his face. "I remember."

The last thing that he wants to do is lose sight of Wilbur— then it'll *really* feel as though his son's gone, slipped through his fingers like water in the ocean— but he knows that it's better than having to submit either one of his other sons to the sight.

He closes his hand around the door handle, pausing to glance back at Wilbur one last time; splayed out on his back on the bed, head leant back against the pillows. There's a peaceful expression on his face, as though he's fast asleep after a long day out.

A memory, small and bleak, resurfaces of Wilbur falling asleep next to Techno on the sofa one night after a patrol. They'd both conked out, Wilbur propped up against the sofa cushions and Techno face-down into the arm of the couch. It was rather hilarious (especially when they both snorted awake at the same time; truly twins) but in the few moments of peace, it'd felt like a type of domesticity that a villain had never thought about being able to achieve.

Wilbur had looked just as at peace then as he does now. The one bitter and almost dark realisation that, at the very least, Wilbur's finally getting some form of sleep is enough to make Phil shake off his thoughts.

Clenching his jaw, Phil turns his head away from the sight, focusing back on reality.

"Call me in if you need me for anything," He comments hoarsely, wrenching the bedroom door and exiting without before he can take another look over his shoulder.



Once the door's shut, he takes a deep breath and eases his back against it. He leans most of— if not all— of what he cannot carry onto the door, finally relinquishing to the sudden throbbing of a headache at the back of his head.

He raises a hand to try and massage it away, but it's futile. He knows that this one will last for a while- however long, he's uncertain.

After giving himself a couple of moments, Phil pulls himself upwards and begins to descend the stairwell. The house is completely silent minus the crackling of the fireplace. How the fire is still going after how long they've all been gone, Phil wouldn't understand. Maybe a work from one of the Gods- hell, he doesn't know.

The stairs creak as he reaches the final step, and in the living room, he can hear a sharp intake of breath and then a shushing sound.

Phil turns his head and has to bite down on his inner cheek not to let out an inhuman noise from his throat.

Tommy.

He hadn't forgotten that the kid was here, but he'd certainly not been thinking about it as much as he had been before he'd gotten that call from Kristin letting him know that something was wrong.

Phil feels his heart sink in his chest at the way Tommy pretty much curls into Techno's arms.

He seems terrified— maybe even beyond that. Phil surely hopes that the kid's not scared of *him*, but he wouldn't blame him for a second if that were the case. He couldn't imagine what he was going through, or what he had gone through when that— Gods, that *monster* had him locked up in a fucking cage like an *animal*.

The thought of Morpheus makes Phil's chest contort for too many reasons to count. As much as he'd love to kill him, to put him through the same thing that he'd put both of his sons through is too much to even think about.

Fuck, how could he have forgotten that as well? Tommy knows this feeling. He's been through this before. That Tommy is Theseus, and always *has* been Theseus, even though the hero had technically died that day.

"It's okay," Techno's murmuring into the boy's hair, arms wrapped around him comfortingly. "It's okay, Tommy. It's just Phil."

At this, Tommy seems to perk up a little. His head tilts up, face peering just barely over Techno's shoulder. His eyes don't quite meet Phil's, but they land just off-centered, as if staring at something that's directly by Phil's face.

In an attempt to be reassuring, Phil gives him a kind smile. "Hey, mate. It's good to see you."

Tommy blinks at him, his hold loosening on Techno a fraction as the relief carefully pricks through him. It doesn't last long, though, as he must remember the situation at hand, and his shoulders wind up again.

He lifts his head higher, letting go of Techno and turning his full attention to Phil. There's a question hanging in the air, one that Tommy's too afraid to ask, but Phil already knows the answer to.

"Kristin's working through it right now," Phil begins, taking a few steps so that he's able to lean against the entryway of the living room. Tommy blinks up at him, his moth wings—whew, that's still something Phil's going to have to get used to seeing, especially with how many holes are in them—fluttering lightly behind his back. "He's going to be okay, though. Kristin knows what she's doing."

Tommy purses his lips, another question forming in his head. In front of him, Techno leans back on his haunches, head leaning back to exchange a worried and silent look with Phil.

*He'll be okay*, Phil taps lightly against the wall, eyes not leaving his eldest son's. *Really, he will be. Breathe.*

Techno nods slowly, but there's something still stewing behind his eyes. Phil knows the feeling full well.

"When has-" Tommy begins, redirecting Phil's attention to him. He pauses, biting his tongue between his teeth as he thinks.

"When has she done this before?" Phil finishes for him, and Tommy gives him a mildly bewildered look.

"I knew you could fly n' shit," he begins, shifting uncomfortably where he's sat. "But please don't tell me that you can read minds, too. That'd be really bad."

Despite himself, and despite the current situation that's left a heavy presence hanging over the entire household, Phil can't help but snort at this. Tommy; he's still the same, one way or another. There's more to him, more that Phil wants to know if he's ever comfortable with sharing, but he knows that *this* will always remain the same.

It hadn't been a joke when Wilbur had randomly blurted out at the breakfast table one morning that Tommy was like a bright light towards them sometimes. The irony of the comparison with what's going on now— the revelation of identities and all of the bullshit that's fallen onto their shoulders— is great enough to make Phil puff his cheeks up in thought.

"No," he says finally, shaking his head fondly. "I can't read minds. Guess it's just, uh..."

"It's a dad thing," Techno fills in for him, his voice a drawl. It shakes a little, but neither Tommy nor Phil point that out (but Phil does notice the way Tommy's eyes flicker to the man's, his hand inching out towards him to flip over palm-up. Techno takes it without hesitation.)

"Yep," Phil confirms, pressing his lips together so he doesn't smile. "It's a dad thing. We've all got this super sense going on."

There's a light in Tommy's eyes for just a moment, before it fades again. "Like Spider-Man?"

Phil raises an eyebrow. "Pardon?"

"Like— y'know, like Spider-Man," Tommy taps his free hand against his thigh. He still won't look at Phil. "He's got the spidey sense n' shit."

"Ah," Phil nods the way he does when he pretends to know what one of his kids are talking about, but is a little too old to understand. "Right, like Spider-Man. Yeah, I'd say that's what it's like. A dad sense, though, not an insect one."

*Dammit, Phil, he thinks to himself suddenly, wincing at his own words and at the way Tommy's wings flutter again limply. The kid is basically an insect hybrid and here you are, pretty much insulting him. Well done.*

"He's never seen Spider-Man," Techno mutters, leaning close to Tommy, hand squeezing the kid's gently. A we're right here with you reminder. "None of 'em. Don't believe a word he says, he's just tryin' to fit in."

"Hey," Phil frowns at Techno. "You weren't supposed to snitch on me like that, Tech, what the hell?"

It's rather hard not to smile, though, when Tommy lets out a low string of giggles. They're strained and slightly sad, but Phil has to keep his jaw locked all the same to keep from laughing with the kid. His laughter's been contagious ever since he'd first hired him at Eldritch Wings (and Gods, does that feel like a long ass time ago. If he'd known then what he knows now, he'd... well, he'd still hire him, but he'd definitely give him a much less workload and up his pay by a lot.)

"Sorry, old man," Techno turns, giving him a ghost of a smile. His free hand taps against the floor, a silent *thank you*. "Don't think we should be fibbin' to Tommy. He'd probably try to fight us or somethin'."

"Oh, I would," Tommy confirms, perking up. "I would, and I'd very much win."

The two continue to discuss— or, well, bicker— with one another about who might win in a fight. It feels, just for a split second, like he's entering his element again. Like everything is normal, and there isn't that looming presence of the person lying in the bedroom upstairs sinking into their backs.

Then, Phil watches as Tommy deflates, face paling and shoulders downturning.

"Sorry," he whispers before either of them can get a word out. "We shouldn't be messing around like this. Not with-" his mouth closes, and Phil's heart clenches when his eyes gloss over again.

He'd seen Tommy cry before, back in the cell, but he'd been so lost and grief-stricken that he'd never registered it.

"Oh, Toms," he begins, voice breaking. He looks to Techno, whose mouth is pursed into a thin line, and he lets out a shaky breath.

Without a second thought, Phil walks over to them both— to his sons— and bends down.

Settling onto his knees, Phil slowly reaches forwards and pulls both of them into his arms tightly. His wings unfurl, wrapping around them and tugging them closer, so that Techno's head rests by his shoulder and Tommy's presses into the front of his shirt.

"It's not your fault," he says gently, and this time his words are directed towards the both of them. He can feel the way they tense—the way the two of them wish to argue, of how they both think that it's their own fault somehow that Morpheus had put a sword through Wilbur's back. "It's not your fault. Neither of you did anything wrong, I promise."

His arms wind tighter around his two sons, burying his face into their backs.

"It's not your fault," he repeats, and it almost sounds like his words are directed towards himself as well. He quiets, the next words coming out in a hushed voice. "I love you both so much. Forever and always."

Neither of them say anything back, but with the way Techno's arms tense around Phil's neck, and Tommy lets out a soft sob, he knows their responses anyways. *Dad-sense*, he reckons.

---

Tommy feels like he could stay in Phil's arms for a long time. Not forever, per se, but for as long as he's able to.

It's nice to know what it's like to be loved. Or something like it.

He'd never thought that he'd hear those words again; *I love you*.

After everything that he's done, everything he's been a part of, he wouldn't blame anyone for feeling anything above repulsed at merely thinking of the words being directed towards him.

And yet, here he is, interlocked in a mass of feathers and arms, pressed into Techno's side and Phil's chest, feeling nothing but loved.

It's a warm feeling, one that temporarily manages to bat down the cold that's always seemed to stick to Tommy's skin like a leech. The last time he'd felt that, it's always been with them-

with the Crafts, with his family. The ones he's always considered family, even though he hadn't been entirely sure that they'd thought the same of him.

There's an 'until now' that he thinks of, but pushes away so that he can simply relish in the cloud of warmth wrapped around him than fall into a confused, indecisive turmoil.

Of course, though, the contentful situation doesn't last long, as a series of knocks pound at the front door. The three of them startle in unison, each tensing in preparation for a fight.

Phil pulls his wings back, giving both of them a look that says stay here.

Of course, the look doesn't pertain to either of them— at least, in their heads— so when Phil rises, the both of them quickly follow.

The man shoots them a mildly agitated look over his shoulder, but relents. Wings puffed up and hand on the dagger at his waist, Phil slowly opens the front door, head peeking around the crevice just in case.

It falls flat rather quickly when Phil's shoulders untense and he exhales in relief.

"Oh, thank the stars," he mutters, doing a full-body lax. "It's just you four. I'd thought-"

"Warden and Jester took care of that," Niki's voice comes from the other side, making Tommy's eyes widen a little. She sounds a bit off, though. "Can we come inside?"

Phil nods, pulling the door open. "Yeah, yeah, of course."

Tommy blinks, watching as the door opens further to allow the multiple people to walk inside. He'd thought that maybe, just maybe, he was wrong about it being Niki's voice; that he was lied to by his own mind, or somehow— even from far away, or wherever Morpheus currently resides— he was still being manipulated.

It isn't the case.

"Tommy," Niki says the second she walks inside, her eyes meeting his. Right beside her stands Dimensional— or Jack, Tommy figures, with the astronaut-like costume the man is wearing— who straightens up at the sight of him, his eyes widening.

To Niki's left, Ranboo and Tubbo walk through, although rather than stand and gawk at him, they both are already making haste to run past everyone to get to him.

Tommy lets out a wet laugh, barely having time to open his arms before his two friends are pretty much slamming themselves into him.

"You fucking dickhead!" Is the first thing out of Tubbo's mouth, his arms squeezing tight around Tommy's torso. "We thought that you had fucking- you scared the shit out of us, you absolute prick!"

Giggling, Tommy hugs them back tighter, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise, either," Ranboo comments, reaching a hand up to flick Tommy in the ear, making the boy squawk. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Tom. We're just happy that you're okay, but..."

They trail off, and Tommy's stomach twists into a knot. He really hopes that they're not implying what he thinks- that they won't bring up the elephant in the room, even though he knows that they should. He knows what's happened, but he doesn't want to even think about it.

What was it that Puffy had called this, back when he'd last spoken to her in the Complex? That dingy, old, essential oil smelling room that made him shift uncomfortably everytime he walked into it?



Grieving, she'd said.

Yadda yadda, something about how he was grieving still; grieving the life he never had, the parents that he never got to meet. Is that what he's doing now? Is he grieving?

Phil clears his throat, redirecting their attention to him. Tommy can't help but feel the slightest bit grateful, arms untwining themselves from his two friends, who won't stop looking at him with that same pitiful expression that they'd had plastered on in the aftermath of the Banquet.

Tommy slinks away, backing up so that he's pressed against Techno's side. Without question, the man wraps an arm around his shoulders and squeezes. Tommy's heart sinks.

He should be the one comforting Techno, not the other way around. It's not Tommy's twin who is laying dead upstairs. It's not Tommy's brother, even though he's always thought of him as that. He didn't grow up with him, didn't get to see Wilbur become the person that he is today— and yet, here he is, moping around as though he's the one that deserves to be grieving.

The realisation makes him curl into himself, and although that gains him a weird look from Techno, he ignores it.

"How did you guys get here?" Phil asks, glancing between Niki and Jack, then back at Tubbo and Ranboo.

Niki shrugs, "Tubbo hijacked a car."

"Yeah, and almost killed us with it," Jack mutters in response, before tensing.

It was an offhand comment, just a joke- and yet, Tommy can't help but feel like he's told someone that they're the biggest idiot alive or something of that nature.

"Sorry." He whispers, looking at his feet.

"It's-" Phil puts on a shaky smile, closing the front door and locking it. "Nevermind. Uh, did you guys happen to see anything on the way here? Any heroes coming to avenge the Complex?"

Niki's face contorts like she's just tasted something sour. "Strangely enough, no, we didn't. We'd all thought that they would've arrived at the Complex the second we were leaving, but nobody showed. We don't have a clue if they are there now, or somewhere else, but we made sure to take every possible safety route on the way here to ensure nobody was following us."

"And the alarms?" Phil questions, crossing his arms.

This time, it's Jack who answers. "No. Even when we were a couple of blocks away, we could hear them still sounding against the walls. Nobody shut them off. I reckon that a few civilians must've called the mayor's office about it, as that's what they do. Our best chance is to keep an eye on the news."

Techno exhales darkly. Tommy presses closer to him, reaching out for the man's hand so that he can give him a reassuring squeeze. He's unsure if it helps, but is grateful to receive a squeeze in return nonetheless.

"Can we even trust it?" Tubbo asks, sounding far more bitter than usual. Tommy turns to his friend, frowning a tad at his tone, but doesn't bring it up.

Jack grimaces, rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't know, but it's our best bet to figure out what's going on."

Tubbo huffs, crossing his arms. "I still think that we should've blown the place up while we had the chance."

Tommy jolts like he's been burned. "You fucking— you wanted to do *what?*"

Tubbo's eyes flit to his, looking unconcerned. "I brought an explosion to the Complex when we were looking for you. I wanted to use it but Ranboo told me not to."

"Good!" Tommy bristles, wrapping his arms around his torso and squeezing. "What the fuck, man? You could've hurt innocent people with that shit."

Tubbo recoils as though Tommy's slapped him, face wrinkling with disgust and hurt.

"I expected that from Ranboo, but not from you as well," Tubbo begins, a weird look in his eyes.

"Why wouldn't I?" Tommy asks, frowning. "You could've- Tubbo, do you know how many people live near the Hero Complex? It's literally in the center of Manberg! There are shops there, and buildings n' shit!"

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you, Tommy!" his friend argues, staring him right in the eyes. "Last I checked, *you're* the one who attended *and* participated in a Banquet that was all just a ruse to kill everyone in the general vicinity!"

Ouch. Tommy reels back, chest stinging.

Tubbo's right, and he knows it, but the boy's eyes still widen in a way that he knows he's said something that, inherently, isn't the best thing to bring up at a time like this.

"Tubbo," Ranboo hisses, sounding a bit more serious than usual. "Shut up."

Surprisingly, Tubbo listens, and the quiet returns.

The fireplace crackles, and nobody says a word. Tommy can feel Techno's hand land back on his shoulder, his thumb rubbing soothing circles into the fabric of his shirt.

It's not a comfort that he deserves, nor one that he's earned, and yet, he can't help but drift towards it anyways. *Selfish*, a voice tells him in the back of his head, one that sounds distinctly like Dream's. *You've always been a selfish person, Tommy. At least own it.*

The long-awaited reunion doesn't last long, though, and the quiet is quickly shattered when a scream echoes from upstairs.

Immediately, the entire group is on alert, but the three closest to the staircase tense more.

Phil's wings retract and his head snaps up, Techno's following suit. Tommy does a full-body turn in the general area of where the scream had sounded and, after a millisecond of letting it register, they're all in a quick haste up the stairwell.

Phil takes the lead, swinging around the railing and making a mad dash (with Techno and Tommy hot on his heels) towards the master bedroom. The floorboards creak and groan under their feet, clearly not used to being trampled on as often as this.

"Stay downstairs!" He shouts at the four standing, mouths agape, by the front door. "Don't come up here! Stay the *fuck* down there!"

There's no time to see if the four listen, though, as Phil reaches forwards and wrenches the bedroom door open.

The sight makes Tommy's heart just about drop out of his chest.

Purple flickers, almost like little fireflies coloured in hues of magenta, dance through the air. They shine in the darkness, gathering together with one another and twisting. In a way, it's almost familiar- and Tommy's stomach twists at the sight, at how the purple was once green

---

"Phil," Kristin hisses, and Tommy's eyes snap to her. She's standing beside the bed, her hands pressed over Wilbur's stomach, directly where the wound had been inflicted. Her hair is ragged, tumbling into her face. "Phil, I need your help."

Without even saying a word, Phil tears himself away from where he'd been standing—shellshocked—in the doorway and pretty much teleports directly by Kristin's side.

"What is it?" He asks frantically, "What's wrong?"

"Wilbur," she whispers, eyes glossy. "It's- he's still in pain. He shouldn't be, he's never had this before. It's not even physically *possible*."

"What? What do you mean, he's still in pain? In- even in *death*?"

"Yes," Kristin seethes, but there is no anger behind her words directed towards Phil. "It's like he's dying over and over again, or is stuck somewhere. I don't know, it's not like anything that I've ever felt before."

A familiar pang goes through Tommy's heart, but he has no time to register what it means before Phil's talking again.

"Can you get him out of it?" he questions, voice tight with fear.

"I can," Kristin reassures, and Tommy can feel the collective relief that washes over the room. "I can, I just- I need your *help*."

Phil's face falls, unsure. "I don't know. I haven't been able—"

"Phil," Kristin reaches one hand up to grab his shoulder. "You can help, I know you can. Put your hands on his chest. I can try and guide you through it. All I need is whatever is left of your Blessing."

Phil swallows, nodding slowly.

Shakily, but with familiar movements, Phil puts his hands overtop of Kristin's. The two of them press down on Wilbur's chest, emanating a purple and black hue of light from their palms that makes Tommy back up a little bit, nearly running directly into Techno, who is just as shock-still as he is.

"Alright," Phil's voice is shaky, and his eyes lift to meet his wife's, everyone else in the room completely gone to him. "Guide me through it, Kristin."

---

The revival sequence isn't like something that Tommy has ever seen before. In fact, it's probably something that Tommy hopes to never see again in his life, but now he can't help but watch in the same way seeing a car crash is a devastating experience that one can't seem to look away from.

Lights flash and flicker, dancing around the entire room in bursts of stars and hisses. The purple and black colours, intermingling with one another, seem to almost act like a sort of stitching device.

They hadn't been kidding when they'd said that it was sickening. Multiple times during it, Tommy nearly keels over at the knowledge of colours and magic weaving Wilbur back together in a strange, metaphorical sense that Tommy finds he could never explain if he was asked.

It's not so much the sights as it is the feeling of life being given and being drained in the room. The contradicting feeling makes Tommy feel off; uneasy.

He has to press his hand back against his chest to remember that his heart is still beating the same *thump-thump* as it was before, and yet it still feels like his soul's being sucked into whatever void has been created inside of Phil's bedroom.

Tommy doesn't know how long it lasts, or when it had ended versus when it had begun; but after what feels like multiple hours have dragged past and his breath has been stolen back by the universe, the bedside lamps flicker on and the bursts of light in the air dim out, like lightbulbs slowly losing their electricity.

Collectively, it seems like everyone drops to their knees to try and gasp for the air that they had lost.

Tommy presses one hand to his throat and the other to the floorboard, heaving. Beside him, he can hear Techno doing the same.

"Boys," Phil coughs out from the other side of the room, and it feels like the whole house creaks with grief when the man stumbles to his feet. "Jesus, are you alright? I hadn't- Gods, I'm so sorry that you had to see that." There's an *again* hanging on the end of his sentence, but Tommy knows it isn't for him.

Phil turns once he's stabilised himself, holding out his hand to help Kristin stand up. She mumbles tiredly, stepping forwards to rest her head against her husband's shoulder.

"We're fine," Techno grumbles finally, letting out a hoarse noise. His hand lands on Tommy's back, patting it reassuringly. "We're good. Tommy?"

"Mhm," Tommy wheezes, lifting his head to give everyone a mildly reassuring thumbs-up. "Doing great, big man. So great."

Phil gives him a small smile. "Okay. Good, that's-" he coughs again, running his hands through his sweaty hair. "That's good. But—"

Someone coughs, and they all freeze, eyes widening collectively.

Their eyes slowly move towards the bed, watching as the man slowly lifts his hand to his chest and lets out a second sharp cough.

They all wait expectantly, but no other noise comes from him.

Phil, making sure that Kristin is still propped up against his shoulder properly, shuffles forwards to gently take Wilbur's wrist in his hand. He holds it up, two fingers pressed to his pulse, and lets out a wet laugh, a bright smile tugging at his face, crinkling the corners of his eyes.

He shakes his head, slowly pressing it to his forehead in a pseudo-way of it being Wilbur putting his hand against Phil's face.

"Is he-?" Tommy chokes out, finally finding his voice and rising to his feet with Techno's help. "Is he—?"

"He's alive," Phil confirms quietly, setting Wilbur's hand gently and reaching out to brush his curls back from his eyes. "He won't be awake for a while, not entirely. He still needs to heal, to process everything."

Tommy lets out a squeaky noise, leaning his weight against Techno's side, who doesn't hesitate to help him keep himself standing upwards properly.

"He's alive?" He asks again, still not convinced. "You're sure? He's-"

"Come here, Theseus," Techno puts his hand on Tommy's shoulder, completely capturing his attention. Carefully, he leads him towards the bedside. "Feel his pulse, kid."



It's with very slight reluctance that Tommy reaches forwards and takes Wilbur's hand. Just as Phil had, he presses his two fingers down against Wilbur's wrist, feeling for a pulse.

He waits and lets out a strangled gasp when he hears it. It's a quiet *thump*, a bit too slow to be normal, but it's still there nonetheless.

He looks up to Techno expectantly, who gives him a gentle smile.

"He's-" Tommy's voice is high and squeaky.

From Techno, he looks to Phil, and then to Kristin. The woman is still leaning all of her weight onto her husband—and looks two seconds from passing out on the spot—but she gives Tommy a tired smile nonetheless.

"Everything's going to be okay now," she promises, reaching out to take his hand. Tommy hesitates before accepting it. It's warm, and there's still the flickering of something- power or whatnot- burrowed inside of her palm.

She lets go, smile not fading.

"I need to rest," she murmurs, pulling herself off of Phil and running a hand through her hair. Tommy notices a few more white strands have appeared than before. It almost looks like her entire head's going to turn white.

"Are you alright?" Techno asks, watching Kristin slowly make her way past them to rest in a different bedroom.

Kristin nods, directing her tired smile at him. Slowly, she raises her hand to run through Techno's hair, tugging lightly at a strand just beside his pointed ear.

"I'll be fine," she tells him, looking close to rolling her eyes. "You all worry too much."

"You just brought someone back to life," Techno points out in a deadpan, but his body language has since relaxed, head tilting in the direction of her hand.

Kristin smirks, "Just another Tuesday, really."

She exits the room, leaving a rather ominous note in her wake. Tommy frowns to himself, considering the multitude of white in her hair, and the constant hinting that there was another time that this happened- some other moment that she'd had to do that same exact thing.

It makes him shift uncomfortably on his feet, arms winding around his torso. As though reading his mind, Techno puts a hand onto the back of his head, a warm but grounding technique that Tommy accepts wholeheartedly.

Across the room, Phil lets out a sigh. He leans against the bed frame, looking at the two of them with a fond but exhausted expression. "I'm sure that everyone's got questions that they want answers to downstairs."

Techno hums, unconcerned. "You can answer them later. You need rest."

"I'm-"

"You also brought someone back to life," Tommy pipes up, pretty much stealing the words right from Techno's mouth. But, rather than call him out on it, Techno just nods curtly. "You and Kristin should *both* be resting."

Phil frowns at them, giving them that stern-but-loving look of his. He crosses his arms, and for a second, the three of them have a staring contest— before he breaks, rolling his eyes fondly.

"Alright, you two shits," he points at them, as if they're the ones in the wrong here. "You're the one that's going to have to explain to everyone downstairs why the whole house shook, though. That's not on me if I'm going to be asleep."

"Yeah, yeah," Techno walks forwards, letting go of Tommy's head to offer Phil a shoulder to lean himself up against. "I got you, you old man. Tommy an' I'll be fine. We can handle some nerds while you and Kristin rest."

"Yeah, definitely," Tommy affirms, nodding aggressively. "We've totally got this. Call us- we're like steel, Phil, our nerves are steel. Like bedrock in Minecraft, we're unbreakable. Call us- call us the bedrock brothers."

Techno snorts, giving Tommy an amused look over his shoulder. "We are not going by that."

"Oh yes we are," Tommy argues, following the man to the edge of the bedroom door. He watches as Techno leads Phil down the hallway, still holding him propped up. "We are going by that, dickhead!"

"Nope!" Techno calls back, earning a chuckle from Phil.

Tommy huffs, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorframe. They are totally going by that, whether Techno likes it or not.

---

*The red stuff keeps growing closer.*

*No matter how far away Wilbur moves from it, it's like the shit knows that he's there; that he's deliberately trying to get as far away from it as possible.*

*He presses himself up against the far wall, back painfully digging into the freezing cold divots in the train station's wall. It's as far from the stuff as he can get, but his eyes continue to flick in its direction, convinced that if he risks another few days here, it'll eventually consume him.*

*Right on cue, the alarms overhead blare again, as though wanting to antagonise him. Instinctively, he reaches up to cover his ears, head tucking down into his knees.*

*Wind brushes against his face, but this time, he feels it; feels the way it moves his hair out of his eyes (kindly, like the way his mother used to).*

*His head lifts from his arms just in time to see the train car stop right in front of him, doors sliding open in waiting.*

---

It's almost funny, having to explain to multiple people that they'd just brought someone back to life and *that's* why they'd heard some batshit crazy noises coming from the other room, and that they were *not* in fact getting murdered by members of the Hero Complex (despite the frazzled look Niki and Ranboo were giving them, clearly convinced beforehand that that was what had been happening).

After a series of breathless explanations from the worst two people to *try* and explain things (really, Tommy and Techno are pretty much a duo) and receiving nothing but extremely confused looks from multiple people, the group comes to a conclusion; to just not question it.

Tubbo and Ranboo look far more curious about the depths about what had happened, but the former won't even look at Tommy, while the latter's expression is contorted with barely concealed concern and a smidge of regret.

The only person who really asks anything more is Jack, who seems to follow his own convention. He makes a passing comment that he's going to ask Kristin and Phil about it later (until Techno threatens to kick his nose in so far he can't breathe for a month... *jokingly*,

Tommy hopes), and then the situation pretty much seems to fall flat. Like a continuous question that one has during a movie premiere but can't ask because it'd ruin the overall vibe for everyone around them.

Eventually, though, things begin to cool off. As the night comes to a close, and Tommy pretty much refuses to go anywhere that isn't within a general radius of the bedroom that his brother's currently half-alive in, everyone starts leaving one by one.

Jack and Niki take off with promises of visiting Las Nevadas and keeping the Syndicate relatively updated on the whereabouts of Morpheus, while Tubbo and Ranboo— who *still* won't so much as look Tommy in the eye, especially after all of that— take off to head back home.

Although the two don't say it, Tommy knows what they're really going to do; probably seek out a hero or two, figure out the mystery.

Vigilante shit that only serves to make Tommy's stomach hurt, even though it shouldn't. He's had his fair share of getting hurt and shit. He has no say in his friends' lives.

Once everyone's left and it's only Tommy and Techno downstairs (with Phil passed out on the armchair after his three showers), a mildly comfortable silence falls.

Tommy curls up on the sofa, arms around his knees. He tugs at the frayed hole in the sweatpants he's borrowing from Techno, just at the kneecap, and thinks.

Everything that's happened has gone by so quickly that he hasn't even had the chance to truly sit down and mull it over. He's not had the chance to think about how, only five or so hours ago, he was practically on death's door in the basement beneath the Complex, begging for someone to save him.

And now here he is, sitting back in the house that he'd wished so much to return to while in the cell, wishing that he wasn't. Wishing that, if he could, he could go back to that jail cell and live out the rest of his life as a science experiment rather than live it knowing that he'd been a featuring factor in having his brother get killed. That he'd pretty much put the entire

Craft family in danger the moment that he met them, the second that he'd decided to start hanging out with them.

He should've known better. He should have known not to do certain things, not to get involved in so much shit that he— if he were smart enough— would have known that he wouldn't be able to get out of it easily.

Tubbo had been right in pretty much calling Tommy a hypocrite when he had. It's not like he had been thinking properly when he'd participated in the Banquet, because he hadn't been. He'd been thinking of himself, of the freedom that he'd gain when he'd get Morpheus (and the Bard, at the time, which only makes Tommy feel worse) off of his back.

"Tommy."

And what would have happened, then, if Tommy had known what he knows now? He wouldn't have participated in the Banquet, that's for certain, but would he still be who he is now? Would Dream still have captured him nonetheless, and would he know who everyone is?

"Tommy."

Flinching slightly at the sound of Techno's voice, Tommy turns his head.

The man is standing on the foyer between rooms, eyebrows pulled together in concern. He shouldn't be concerned. Not for Tommy.

"Yeah?"

Techno's frown deepens at the sound of his voice. "What's wrong?"

Tommy shrugs, settling his chin on his knees. "Nothin's wrong. I'm just thinking."

"Tommy," Techno begins, sounding just like he would whenever Tommy would get upset about certain things that would happen in the myths Techno would tell him about. "You were kidnapped and tortured by Morpheus endlessly for days. You were kept malnourished and sick in a cell. You've been—" the man takes a sharp breath, clearly not wanting to say the words *killed and revived, and then forced to watch the same exact thing happen to someone you care about*.

Tommy puts his forehead against his knees as though he's heard it anyways.

"Look," Techno begins, his tone softer. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it, kid. I'm not gonna force you. But I do want you to know that it's alright to feel like this."

"No it's not," Tommy says weakly, shaking his head. His hands are beginning to shake, but he ignores the feeling. "It's not okay to feel like this. I'm feeling fine."

"Contradictin' yourself a bit there," Techno points out lightly, and then sighs. "I know what it's like, you know. To want to keep up some sorta- I dunno, a wall, I suppose?"

The man waits a moment, as if expecting Tommy to respond. When he doesn't, Techno continues.

"It's easy to think that your problems aren't as big as what others have got," Techno rumbles. "But Tommy, you were hurt. Badly. You are still hurt, and... Jesus, kid, I don't even know where to begin with this, but... know that I'm here for you, okay? I'm here for you to talk to, to indulge your problems with. I'm not exactly the best talker, and I don't have good advice like Phil, but I'm alright at listenin' if you ever just want someone to stay quiet while you're ramblin'."

"I should be there for you," Tommy whispers, so softly that he feels like he's speaking to himself. "I should be the one comforting you right now, offering you a listening ear, not the other way around."

Techno makes a confused noise and Tommy has to suppress a flinch when the man's footsteps come closer.

"What do you mean, Tommy?" He asks.

Tommy takes a shaky breath, running his hand over his forehead. "I mean- I should be the one comforting you, Techno. You're the one that lost a family member, that..." he chokes up, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry, Techno. I'm sorry."

A hand lands on his back, rubbing soothing circles into his spine.

"I'm so sorry," Tommy continues, voice cracking. "I'm so sorry about what happened. Nobody should ever have to go through that. *I'm so sorry.*"

Something shifts beside him, and a weight pulls part of the sofa down. Tommy doesn't have to look over to know it's Techno that is tugging him into his arms, chin resting atop his hair.

Neither of them say another word when Tommy turns and wraps his arms around the man, squeezing tight around his torso. It's a hold that rings of familiarity to the one that they'd had before everyone else had come along through the front door, but softer.

It almost feels like forgiveness.

"You're right," Techno mutters after a moment, making Tommy's chest contort. "Nobody should have to go through that. But I wasn't the only one who lost a brother tonight, Tommy."

Tommy hiccups into fabric, shaking his head. "He's not my real brother."

"That doesn't matter," Techno interjects firmly, a weird tone to his voice as he rubs his hand up and down Tommy's back. "We're still your family, even if not biological. I'm still your



brother, Phil's still your dad, and Wilbur's still your other brother— albeit, slightly dumber, but whatever."

Even though it's a joke within a bad situation, Tommy still manages to let out a short laugh.

"I appreciate you caring about me, kid," Techno says, voice low like the crackling of the fireplace that has long since gone out. "Really. It's nice to know that someone cares, but I'm going to be okay. Wilbur's going to be okay, too. We saw him get revived, we heard him make a noise, and you felt his *pulse*, Tommy. He's alive, and he's going to be alright."

Tommy sniffs, burrowing closer into Techno's arms. "You're sure?"

"One hundred percent," Techno confirms, chin resting on Tommy's curls. "We'll get through this together. Like a family, remember?"

Again, Tommy laughs, but it's wet. "Like a family."

He can't see it, but he's certain that Techno smiles.

## Chapter End Notes

okay before u come for me: i promise benchtrio will make up. tubbo is just a bit stressed out atm processing all of the information he's been given and took it out on his friend. i promise it'll be resolved hsjshdjdd, he does care a lot for tommy <3 (and ranboo will most likely smack some sense into him lol). again; reiterating that a lot of characters in this fic are very heavily morally grey! nobody is completely in the right or the wrong. except maybe dream, who is just a straight-up asshole

aaanyways. this chapter was written during a literal fever dream (i caught hashtag bovid and decided it'd be funny if i tried to write, and thus: this happened) so hopefully it's not too strange ahakshj. i'm not the biggest fan of how it was written tbh so i may go back and rewrite it someday haha.

also! i know that the part where niki, jack, & beeduo dont run upstairs during the revival sequence is a bit out of character, but i'd like to think that kristin or phil cast some type of protection over the bedroom so that anyone who wasn't direct family couldn't get in, if that makes sense <3 (coughs they think of tommy as direct family coughs).

hope u all enjoyed the chap <3 this'll be the last decently long wc for a while. stay safe out there skrunks, ily /p

minor dsmg lore spoilers below:

ALSO HAHAAHAHA DID U SEE THAT FUCKING LORE STREAM TODAY. UHM???? what the FUCUCCKKKKKKKKK. "you mean the world to me bro" IM ???? i need to LAY. DOWN. i'm never going to fucking recover whag the fucking shit !!!!! i'm . i have so many thoughts !!!! so many thoughts. i need to RECOVER from that shit godddd damn. okay. anyways . bye bye. hooooooly shit!

here's a link to my discord server if u want to come cry w me abt crimeboys or something: [discord server!!](#)

# ashes, stardust; look at you, crawling out the mud

## Chapter Summary

“Can I ask you a question?” Techno speaks up suddenly, voice gruff and unsure.

Tommy startles slightly, eyes opening. “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Techno pauses, awkwardly braiding a few strands of Tommy’s hair. “When you dyed the front tips of your hair red... was that to hide it?”

Tommy purses his lips, stomach clenching. That was a question he probably should’ve expected.

“Not... not exactly,” he begins, voice quiet. He fidgets with his hands, prodding at his fingertips and cracking his knuckles. “No, well, it was, but it’s... I don’t know. It’s difficult to explain.”

Techno hums, “That’s alright, you don’t have to explain it. But I just wanted you to know that you don’t have to hide it anymore. Nobody’s going to make fun of you for it.”

Tommy laughs dryly, settling his chin onto his knees. “Thanks, big man.”

or, everyone is trying to heal in their own ways. tommy is still depressed, and also every hero from the hero complex is missing. shit is Wild innit

(chapter title from the song ‘butterflies and black & blue birds’ by dave matthews band!)

## Chapter Notes

happy one year anniversary to this stinky smelly fic!! it’s been fucking CRAZY. i can’t believe we made it to a year what the fuck???? :0 hooooly shit.

on that note! here’s a slightly more fluffy chapter. well- okay, it’s not fluffy, per se, it’s just... lighter than the ones that have been around more recently. i was hoping to go for a more tommy pov chapter like how the fic was at the veery beginning. i hope you like it (: and a massive thank you to everyone for sticking around with me for this long <3 it means a lot. i’m genuinely so fucking grateful for all of you that are *still* catching up with this fic after an entire year of it ongoing. that is so fucking cool and honestly amazing. it’s been one of my dreams for a long time to write something investing & long like this (with comedy-esque dialogue, lmfao), so i’m glad that you’re all enjoying it still <3 i love all of you, and once again, thank you so much for all your support :D

here are the tws for this chapter! please keep in mind that this chapter still deals with the grieving process, so if that's something that triggers you, i would recommend reading the chapter summary in the comments instead!

**okay. onto the tws:**

mentions of previous child neglect, phantom pains, the general feeling of "being left out", self-hatred & self-esteem issues, unhealthy coping mechanisms, paranoia/anxiety & depression mentions, feelings of suffocation (mostly within wilbur's limbo), & just overall the aftermath of dealing with grief. please stay safe <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

---

*A train whirs, flashing through a tunnel of bright purples and reds. Wilbur keeps his hands attached to the bar from where he's stood in the center of the train. His face presses against the chill of the metal, intent to keep from noticing the dark shadows standing around him.*

*They mock him, he feels; the whispering of his old deeds and thoughts having been the only thing he's heard over the past few days other than his own wheel of thoughts. Amongst them, the green and red amalgamations have been the only things to keep him company.*

*Taking a breathless inhale, Wilbur closes his eyes. He listens to the distant, overhead alarms that sound ever so familiar. He can't name where they're from; he's unsure if he can name anything anymore.*

*The train halts with urgency, screeching metal against iron making his head whip up expectantly. Someone is speaking over the train's intercom, but Wilbur can't reach them, nor make out what it is they're saying. If he tries hard enough, he can almost make out his mother's and father's voices.*

*The train doors whisk open, blowing the hair out of his face, and he turns. Pushing through the crowd of scattered shadows whose faces he cannot see, Wilbur scrambles towards the doors and tosses himself through them.*

The feelings come all at once.

First, his hands, tingling and numb; then, his head, which throbs against his skull. He lets out a soft wince, hand reaching up to press against the center of his chest, the very place he remembered a blade once being. Nothing's there, but he can still the phantom pain of where the sword had lodged itself, as though it had made a home to forever remain.

Slowly, Wilbur opens his eyes for what feels like the first time and draws in a deep breath of fresh air. Of *real* air.

It's sharp and cold, daggers down his throat, but he lets out a choked laugh anyway. He's back. He's alive, he's here, and no longer does that constricted feeling remain just at the center of his chest.

*There is that feeling, though, he realises— somewhere deep down, the acknowledgement that there's something wrong, like seeing something out of one's peripheral but not being able to figure out what it is.*

With a hand pressed against his chest, Wilbur takes another sharp breath, and closes his eyes.

Finally, he has returned home.

---

It doesn't take as long as Tommy had originally thought it would for things to begin to calm down in the Craft household.

A few days pass by and, despite everything feeling like a tremendous fever dream, time slowly resumes to its natural pace. Or what *had* been its natural pace before all of this had happened.

Niki and Jack continue to swing by with updates from Las Nevadas, whilst also making deals with Phil and Techno about 'watch times'. Watch times being defined as *'guarding over Wilbur's unconscious self until he, at some point, hopefully, wakes up'*.

Originally, Tommy had tried to argue that he wanted to do it twenty-four seven, but was promptly (and quickly) shut down from doing so. It's for the best, he figures, even though his skin still itches with the feeling of not keeping the promise that he'd made with the man.

After a while, it becomes a sort of glorified schedule. Tommy watches over Wilbur around lunch time, Techno watches him during the night (switching every so often with Niki, both of whom are pretty much nocturnal), and everyone else interchanges throughout the daytime.

It's not entirely what Tommy had wanted, but he figures it's the best that he's going to get. He'd really not been wanting to leave Wilbur's side at all (and he could tell that Techno and Niki were both right there with him on that, albeit Niki had more of a tough-love act going on with the guy at the moment), but he's fine with the hours he has.

Besides, it's not like anyone else complains if he wanders into the room and sits with them for a while to help watch Wilbur.

The worst of it, though, is that it's... difficult, he finds, to keep in mind that Wilbur is no longer dead; that his brother *is*, in fact, breathing in the next room over, and the white fringe at the front of his hair isn't just an act of Tommy's imagination running rampant again.

The only thing that seems to help to remind himself— or better yet, *convince* himself— that Wilbur is alright, and that there is a heartbeat beneath his ribs if Tommy were to hug him again, is by checking his pulse every two minutes.

Tommy knows fully well that it's a process that takes time, coming to terms with this; he is no stranger to grief.

Maybe it's for the best that he's parted from Wilbur though, just for now. As much as he wishes to remind himself that his friend's heart is still beating, the routinely *thump-thump* humming against Tommy's fingertips, he knows that there are different things he should be doing.

There are so many discussions to be had, so many passing glances passed between family members that he'd thought he'd known (who had thought they'd known *him*) that he can't always run away from, despite how much he wants to.

For now, though, things are quiet, and Tommy finds that every day becomes a bit of a strange routine in some type of way. It doesn't even feel real, how quickly he falls into the role of whatever it is he's doing now—waking up, having cereal for breakfast (unless Niki pops by with Jack and decides to whip up something on the stove), and sit by the window to watch the snowfall or the lights flickering in the front yard.

When Niki and Jack swing by, they don't speak to him much. When they do, though, it's quick passing glances that say more than words could. Tommy almost wants to be pissed with them for not mentioning who they are to him, but he knows that he can't be when he'd only been doing the same for so long.

It *is* rather strange having multiple people that Tommy's known at some time or another all crowded together into one house, but he wouldn't say that it's the craziest thing that he's ever gone through. Even if it is a little freakish to see Jack, who has been working alongside him at the cafe for months, grin at him in his Dimensional suit in the mornings, or Niki, who doesn't stick around for long but stays behind for enough time to cook breakfast on the stove whilst dawning her gold and brown Nemesis outfit.

In a way, it almost feels like a crazy fucking dream threaded together by Morpheus with Hypnos's help or something. Even though Tommy isn't entirely certain if Hypnos even knew about what Dream had been planning with him, much less knew that he, former hero Theseus, was actually alive this whole time.

According to Nemesis— no, Niki— and Jack, there hadn't been any sightings of the heroes at the Complex. Nobody showed up, despite the alarms blaring for multiple hours on end. It was all on the news, too, for Tommy to watch tiredly the morning after they'd done the process on Wilbur: the bizarre disappearance of every citizen of Manberg's beloved heroes, minus a few of the minor ones.

If Tommy thought that there was terror sweeping the city when the Banquet happened, it was nothing compared to what was going on now that everyone was losing their shit over the loss of almost every member of the Hero Complex.

One of the heroes that weren't as well known- Confidant, his name was, which Tommy had always found particularly stupid- came on television at one point to announce that he would be stepping up as Manberg's leading hero until the detectives they'd employed found Morpheus and the rest of them. (And just hearing the name Morpheus come out of the hero's mouth made Tommy flinch into the cushions. It had a pretty similar effect on the rest of the villains in the room, too, with Niki clenching her jaw and Phil's face darkening).

If that wasn't bad enough, Tubbo and Ranboo haven't come by since the argument that they'd had a few days prior. Every time Tommy asks Techno or Jack about them, they each say the same thing: *they don't know where they are, but they're safe, so don't worry too much*. Whether it's a lie or not, Tommy doesn't have it in him to overthink it like he usually would.

It's not a surprise to Tommy that neither of them have tried to reach out, but it still hurts nonetheless. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't spending most of his time that wasn't occupied by watching Wilbur or taking hour-long baths (in hopes to scrape off every follicle of dirt left over from that cell) by the window.

The snow continues to fall hard as the days pass, blanketing the front and backyard with a white sheet. Tommy's back hurts every time he looks at it for too long, but he can't seem to tear his eyes away like it's a particularly interesting tragedy. God, how awful that sounds.

*(Theseus's story was a tragedy, he recalls on one day, the voice in his head sounding both bitter and smug. Why is it such a surprise that yours may resemble his when you've stolen his name?)*



Another addition to Tommy's new schedule is the news on the television. Despite him ignoring its presence in his day-to-day life only a few months prior, he now can't help but glance over at the screen whenever Phil or Jack sit huddled in front of it, mouths drawn into thin lines at the streets rioting in Manberg over the loss of their number one heroes.

As much as Tommy would prefer to watch something nicer, like another Ghibli movie, it becomes a strict appearance in his life.

The news station is, unfortunately, the only show that seems to play on the Craft family television nowadays, constantly bombarding the front living room with the sounds of sirens and newscasters being overly dramatic about how the heroes still haven't shown their faces.

It is a fact that Tommy knows he should be more concerned about, something that makes him feel like he should pretty much lock himself away in his room in case they are to ever come looking for *the kid that made their number one member go missing* or whatever the fuck, but he can't find it in himself to bring his thoughts away from quite literally anything else.

(How strange it is to think about how different things would be if he'd never had followed Dream to the top of the Hero's Tower. Would he still be where he is? The question does nothing but make him want to run to the bathroom, bile peeling up his throat).

As the days trickle by and grow exponentially colder, everything feels *so strange*. Dreamlike, in a way, which only makes Tommy's anxiety grow at the mere thought.

He finds that he would prefer everyone to be staring at him strangely, though, and never quite speaking to him despite him living amongst them (and taking the guest bedroom just down the hall again, the way he used to—the way he feels he's done multiple times before, like it's *meant* for him).

The day will come when the routine shatters. He knows this; he knows that there is so much to talk about, so many conversations to be had with more people than just the ones that he's living amongst like a weed sticking out in a patch of roses.

On that day, all hell will break loose; the dam will fall, and he will drown with it. For now, though, he lets the boat rock against the waves, and holds his breath.

The routine becomes more like clockwork. A glorified version of what Tommy used to have—waking up at god knows what time in the morning to stumble his way to his first job at Eldritch Wings, then head off to his second one at the warm cafe. Nook's café... Sam's. The Warden's. (Jesus... it's another thought he has to shelf off for a later time, for when he's sat at a round table with everyone that had been there at the Complex on *that day*. It'll be solemn, but it's coming. He knows it).

The only thing that remains the same in the face of everything, though, is Tommy. He's the one that isn't a hero, nor a villain; he's a civilian now, which is what he certainly prefers to be, but it does make his skin itch every time he watches the others gear up to go patrolling, or catches a glimpse of Nemesis and Dimensional's full-suited figures appearing in the kitchen.

Tommy doesn't even know what they're up to and he wouldn't go as far as to say that he feels betrayed by it in the slightest—truly, how could *he* be saying something like that?—but it does feel like something close to the word.

Not betrayal; there's another word for it, but Tommy can't quite find the name for it.

Nevertheless, he ignores the feeling, and continues to keep his head down.

---

Phil is worried.

It's a natural response, he figures, to be worried after everything that's been going on; one of his sons died and he had to help revive him because he *wouldn't come back*, his other son is currently working through the five stages of grief, and his youngest is... unresponsive, in a way.

The best word would be *distant*, but Tommy's always been like that. Phil knows why now, and the mere thought— the mere *memory*— of what Jester and Warden had told him back at Tommy's old apartment makes him feel sick every time he pieces it together. Even thinking that the boy that's currently sitting in the window seat by their Christmas tree was once a hero, was once the very protégé that Techno used to come home grumbling about because he didn't understand it... it feels like fate, in some twisted, demented way.

Then again, fate's always had it weird with Phil's family. He supposes that this is the consequences for having two members that were Blessed by Lady Death, and two others who — now, at least— have been cheated death itself.

A fortunate thing, though, is that Phil isn't the only one that's concerned. In fact, he knows he isn't the only one. In between their silent, closed-door meetings that they have, Niki and Jack always mention Tommy— always whisper in hushed voices with wide eyes about how young he is, and how young he had been when he'd been with Dream. They ask how he is, and if he's better, even though they already know the answer to that question.

Phil figures Niki would know most of all. As much as she'd deny it, he sees the way she looks at Tommy, as if he's a mirror image of her own self. Wilbur would probably tease her about it if he were awake— would make jokes about how Tommy's both of their little brother or something, anything that'd make Niki close to punching him again.

“Sitting by the window again?” Kristin murmurs from beside him, startling him slightly out of his reverie.

She's back up and walking around again, which he finds to be a small miracle amongst the wreckage left in their wake the past couple of days. She's got a mug clutched between her hands and her eyebrows are furrowed, face turned in Tommy's direction.

Phil nods solemnly, leaning his shoulder against the stairwell railing. Even if Tommy can feel the two of them watching him— which he's certain that the boy can, he's always been good at that sort of thing— he doubts that he'll turn around to try and catch their eyes. Rather, he's been avoiding them.

As much as Phil understands where he's coming from, it still stings a little bit. Not at all Tommy's fault, but moreso his own. He'd gotten attached far too quickly. They all had.

Kristin hums slowly, shifting on her feet. “Think I should go speak to him?”

Phil blinks, turning his head. “What?”

“I think I should speak to him,” she repeats, sound more sure of herself now. She taps one of her nails against the mug with a *clink* and turns her head, giving Phil a placating look. “If you’ve pretty much adopted him at this point, then I have too, Phil. Plus... he deserves to hear what I have to say. The poor thing is *terrified*.”

“He’s also sixteen,” Phil whispers, and hearing the words out loud makes him grimace. He hasn’t admitted them to himself verbally in a long time. He’d heard Tommy admit that he was fifteen— which feels like *ages* ago now— but he’d barely even fully comprehended how young that is, or that Tommy had gone missing on his sixteenth birthday.

Gods, Phil feels ill. And slightly overwhelmed. He’s going to have to call Niki about a cake.

“Sixteen,” Kristin repeats, her tone reflecting the horror twisted in Phil’s stomach. “Stars... I know you’ve told me before that he’s fifteen, but it feels like it’s only just now sinking in.”

“I know,” Phil rubs at the wrinkles on his forehead, suppressing a huff at the fact that he’s getting *wrinkles*. His kids would have a field day if this were any other time. “He’s too young for all of this. It’s awful that he had gone through all that shit.”

‘*Shit*,’ he finds, is a bit of an understatement for *dying and then being revived*. Phil would probably get another migraine if he tried to weave together all the threads of Tommy’s story.

“He’s strong,” Kristin responds quietly, eyes still trained on Tommy, watching the boy’s wings flicker a little bit underneath the blanket he’s got wrapped around his shoulders. She clears her throat and turns, setting her mug into Phil’s fumbling hands. “I’m going to tell him.”

Phil clutches the mug close, watching his wife with a frown. “Tell him what?”

Kristin shrugs, a ghost of a smile on her face. “What he needs to hear. I’d reckon he’s tired of all of us just standing about and staring at him like he’s a zoo animal, don’t you think?”

Ah. Yeah, Phil probably should’ve gotten that one earlier. He tries to swallow down the mirth gathering in his throat as he watches Kristin walk down the rest of the steps and cross the room to where Tommy’s sat.

He knows that it’ll go alright— or at least, he hopes. Kristin has always been good at setting emotions out on display for all to see. If anyone’s ever worn their heart on their sleeve in their family, it’s always been Kristin.

*Maybe*, he begins to think, watching as Kristin settles down with a kind smile beside Tommy, who curls up in a ball and watches her with guarded eyes. *That’s how they’d found Tommy, too.*

---

Tommy settles near the fireplace, arms around his legs and chin settled on his knees.

The snow falls out the far window heavily, and he shudders at the mere sight, moving ever so slightly closer to the hearth. It’s nice, he thinks, to feel this; the warmth provided from the fire that seeps into his bones in a way he wishes would always stick with him, the comfort of being where he is.

He doesn't really like being alone nowadays, especially late at night, but he can't help but think it is for the best.

As much as he's been reassured that he's family, and none of this is his fault, he still feels really guilty for all of it. For the Banquet, for Wilbur, for Morpheus even setting his sights on

the Crafts in the first place (although, rationally, he realises that would've happened anyways, with them being supervillains and all; but it still makes him nauseated to think about).

His wings flutter behind him dully, and he exhales, digging his forehead into his arms. The remnants of a headache still pound behind his eyes and he knows that he'd probably be falling ill if it weren't for the constant Harming potions that Phil has been—reluctantly—allowing him to have (and really, it's been hilarious to see the expression on the man's face when he watches Tommy swig down something that's naturally supposed to be harming, as is in the name. At the very least, it makes Tommy feel better).

There hasn't really been much going on over the past few days, which only forms a sort of crawling sensation underneath his skin. The want—or need—to be out of the house and doing something to assist everyone that's currently doing everything in their power to both keep Dream contained and track down everyone that's missing.

The floorboards creak and Tommy flinches, head turning in the direction of the sound.

He relaxes slightly when he recognises Techno walking into the room, book underneath one arm and rectangular glasses pressed up his nose. He looks incredibly relaxed minus the strain between his eyebrows that has been there for days now. Tommy knows the feeling—waiting has never been something that he's good at.

"Hey," Techno greets, tilting his head. "You alright?"

"Yeah, 'm fine," Tommy reassures, turning back to look at the fire. "Just thinking. You know how it is."

Techno huffs, sounding a bit amused. "Yeah, I s'pose."

There are more creaking sounds as Techno crosses the room and takes a seat beside him in front of the fireplace, book settling down into his lap. Tommy turns his head to glance at it, stomach twisting when he recognises the golden-fronted cover of the book.

"I never did get to finish telling you about popular Greek figures," Techno begins quietly, fingers tapping against the book. "I understand if you don't want to know, but I... uh, thought it'd be nice. If you wanted to just listen." Like we used to.

Tommy hums. Although he's not entirely certain he'd like to hear about them anymore, he nods all the same.

"Yeah," he accepts, staring as one of the logs of wood falls in the fire, making a clunking noise against the hearth. "That'd be nice."

"Alright," Techno shifts, opening the book and leaning back against the wall. He's sat pretty close to the Christmas tree, which Tommy finds vaguely funny. If he's not careful, he might make the whole thing come crashing down onto his head (which, honestly, would be the highlight of Tommy's entire week). "Do, uh... do you want me to braid your hair again as well?"

It's a bit out of nowhere, but Tommy's heart lifts all the same. Then, he frowns.

"You can't braid hair and read from a book at the same time," he points out, turning to look at the man.

Techno waves his hand dismissively, setting the book aside. "I don't really even need the book. I've memorised most of it. Usually, it's just something for my hands to hold while I'm reading."

Ah; another thing that Tommy understands quite well.

"Oh," Tommy breathes, then nods, in a slight daze. He hasn't had his hair braided in a long, long time. Honestly, he can't remember when the last time had been— much less when the last time it was done by Techno. "Yeah, uhm... okay. I'd like that."

Techno gives him a small smile, patting the space in front of him. "Alright, come here then, kid."

Hesitantly, Tommy shuffles his way towards Techno and turns, pressing his knees to his chest and settling his chin on top of them. He presses his wings against his back and pushes his hair back so that Techno can reach it.

Ever since he'd been taken by Dream, his hair had grown a bit longer so that it now brushes against his collarbone. He kind of likes it, honestly— it's a stark difference from how short he'd been forced to keep it while he was a hero.

The feeling of Techno combing his fingers through Tommy's hair isn't an entirely alien feeling, but it's such a distant memory that it makes the kid flinch at first.

"Sorry," Techno mutters, and Tommy just hums.

It's a comforting thing, having his hair done— albeit, slightly bittersweet. Tommy leans into his older brother's hands a little, eyes slipping close with contentment.

Maybe if he tries hard enough, he can imagine that they're elsewhere; that there's an alternate universe where everything is okay, where Wilbur is sitting on the sofa nearby laughing with Phil about some random video on Youtube while Kristin makes fun of them for being ridiculous— where Tommy has never been and will never be Theseus.

The concept almost feels wrong to think about, even if the idea should bring some sense of comfort. It's strange to realise that there really can't be a world where Tommy himself exists and Theseus does not.

The thought makes Tommy swallow the bile gathering in his throat. Maybe it's best if he doesn't think about existential things while his friend braids his hair.

"Can I ask you a question?" Techno speaks up suddenly, voice gruff and unsure.



Tommy startles slightly, eyes opening. “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Techno pauses, awkwardly braiding a few strands of Tommy’s hair. “When you dyed the front tips of your hair red... was that to hide it?”

Tommy purses his lips, stomach clenching. That was a question he probably should’ve expected.

“Not... not exactly,” he begins, voice quiet. He fidgets with his hands, prodding at his fingertips and cracking his knuckles. “No, well, it *was*, but it’s... I don’t know. It’s difficult to explain.”

Techno hums, “That’s alright, you don’t have to explain it. But I just wanted you to know that you don’t have to hide it anymore. Nobody’s going to make fun of you for it.”

Tommy laughs dryly, settling his chin onto his knees. “Thanks, big man.”

Silence falls again for a second, and Tommy lets his eyes slip close. For a moment, there is nothing— there’s just Tommy and Techno, two brothers sat on the floor in the living room of their father’s (*their* father’s?) house, content with being simply near one another.

Then, a finger tucks some hair behind Tommy’s ear, and he can hear Techno make a confused sound.

“Did you go outside today, Tommy?” Techno questions, and Tommy frowns a little. Both because it’s a stupid thing to ask— why the hell would Tommy ever go outside in this weather?— and because it’s the last thing he’d expected to hear.

“No,” Tommy responds simply, opening his eyes a fraction to wrinkle his nose, even though Techno can’t see the expression on his face. “Why?”

There's a pause, and then Techno lets the strand behind his ear fall with the clearing of his throat. "No reason. I was just wonderin'."

Still confused, Tommy gives the fire crackling in front of him a strange look— as though it can see his face and understand him— but decides it's better if he doesn't ask.

(If later he notices the snowdrop tucked into the braid that Techno had done over his ear, he decides to pretend that he hadn't.)

---

Phil has been trailing behind Tommy for a while.

It was probably going to happen at some point— this is his house, after all— but Tommy was truly hoping that it wouldn't be this soon.

The first question out of Tommy's mouth when he whirls on the man is something stupid, but he's *tired*. He's tired of acting like he doesn't know what's going on, of having to sieve through kindness and good-nature to pick out the true meaning of a person's words.

He's tired, and for once, he doesn't pretend.

"Are you kicking me out?" he asks, blunt and to the point.

Expectantly, the man blinks a few times, obviously taken aback by his question. Tommy hasn't really spoken to the Crafts much since he's been here, both by his own volition and theirs. Too much to say, too little words to try and bring out of his clouded mind.

“Am I-?” Phil begins, shaking his head as though to restart it. “No, Tommy, I’m not kicking you out. I wouldn’t even dream of it.”

Oh. That’s a bit of a shock, but... Tommy bites the inside of his cheek. Phil had told him that they’re family multiple times, as had Techno and Kristin— albeit one more stern than the other— and Tommy believes them, of course he does, it’s just that everyone’s been a bit distant recently.

Coping, just as he has. He doesn’t blame them for a single second, and he never would, but he’s been waiting for the day that it finally clicks for them that he isn’t the same kid that they’d thought he was.

Rather, Tommy is an extension of Theseus; a piece of the former hero that cannot be undone, no matter how much he wished he could. He always has been connected to Theseus, and despite Tommy’s hopes, he always will be. Tommy had already tried to part ways with his alter ego once, and it had done nothing but get his brother killed.

“Why?” Tommy blurts out, blinking at the man. A part of him knows, somewhere deep down, that it’s a stupid question. That Phil has always thought of him as family; that Kristin’s words to him only a day or so prior still ring true. *You’re our son, Tommy, and we love you.* And yet, the doubt still claws at his throat.

Tommy clears it, as though hoping to tear it away like phlegm, but it doesn’t work. So, instead, he continues. “I know- uh, I know that you’re- that I’m—” he breathes. He can’t say the word. It’d sting too much if Phil turned around and denied it at this point. “That I’m *a friend*, but I’m not exactly— Phil, I don’t normally *live* with you. I wouldn’t blame you if I’ve overstayed my welcome or anything like that.”

There’s more to the ‘*anything like that*,’ but neither of them bring it up, even if Phil’s face contorts at it a little bit. Tommy would be lying if he claimed he knew what that expression meant. He only hopes it’s nothing bad.

“Tommy,” Phil begins, taking a breath, and Tommy has to mentally prepare himself for whatever the man’s going to say. “Christ, kid, can- can I hug you?”

*Oh*, a voice in Tommy's head says. *Oh*.

Tommy stares at the man for a moment, taken aback. His mouth dries, but even though he can't seem to form words, his head nods like it's something that realistically, he shouldn't even have to think about.

Unlike him, it's without a second of hesitation that Phil pulls him forwards and wraps him up in a familiar feeling; warm arms and now— at the expense of not wearing his hybrid hiding earring for once— *feathers*.

Tommy lets out a low noise that he hopes doesn't sound like a cry, but it must, as Phil tugs him even closer and runs a hand through the back of his hair.

"It's okay, Toms," he whispers. "I'm not going to make you leave. *Nobody's* going to make you leave, kiddo. I've told you before, but I'll continue to tell you until you've got it knocked into your silly little brain— you're *family*. You're just as much my son as Techno and Wil are, and you're just as much Kristin's, too, as I'm sure she's told you."

*She has*, Tommy thinks with a small, wet laugh. *I don't think it sunk in, no matter how many stern looks she gave me to make sure I understood.*

"Theseus..." Phil begins, voice a murmur, and Tommy's throat tightens at the name. "He's you, Tommy, and do you know what? I wouldn't change you for the whole world."

Tommy lets out a cough, burying his face into Phil's shoulder. He won't let him see him cry. He knows that he has before, but he can't. Not now.

"We love you," Phil continues, voice far too gentle. A hand rubs gentle circles into his back, just like Wilbur used to do when Tommy got migraines at work. "We don't care about who you used to be. You've shown us that you don't care about who we *are*, either, Tommy. Even if you did someday, we would *never* toss you out for speaking your mind. Tommy, you are *not* a burden here. You never are. You're with us, and that's all that matters."

It's almost funny, the way Tommy sinks into Phil's arms; into the arms of a supervillain, the very type that once upon a time, Tommy would've been asked by Dream to deliver the death blow to. He never would have, not even when he'd once believed Dream to be a good man, but it's still something that makes every part of him nauseated to even *think* about.

Tommy lets out a soft exhale, arms tightening around Phil's form. It's a first step in the right direction, he figures. There's still so much left to do, and he knows it— but it's a step.

---

Tommy isn't sure what to feel.

Fear, or maybe surprise?

Albeit, that last one is probably what everyone had originally *meant* him to feel, hence the phrase *surprise party*.

The delicately decorated cake rests on the counter in front of him, icing perfectly tipped and rounded on the edges in a way he immediately recognises as Niki's own work. There are a few mishaps here and there in red and blue vibrant gel-icing that he couldn't *not* recognise as Jack being an idiot, but it's... it's nice, the cake.

It is, however, the last thing that Tommy had expected to find on the kitchen table when he'd hauled himself out of bed that morning. It's so out of character with the daily life he'd grown accustomed to that it's enough to snap him out of his dreamland long enough to glare up at everyone who is standing to the sidelines expectantly.

"Fuck is this?" he asks, gesturing to the cake as though it's personally offended him.

When he looks up, everyone's giving him a dim smile— even Jack, who had originally looked constipated when Tommy had come down the stairs ten minutes ago, just woken up from a two hour power nap.

“It’s yours,” Kristin speaks up, offering him that same gentle smile. He tries not to meet her eyes, but it’s difficult— everything about her screams *inviting*, from the way she speaks to her overall motherly aura.

She speaks to him frequently. Or, well, it’s *recently* become a frequent thing. Tommy doesn’t mind. It scares him a little bit, though, each time she takes a seat beside him by the window. He doesn’t quite understand why— before it had been out of fear she’d make him leave, but now it’s probably something to do with the fact that she radiates of Death.

Tommy hadn’t originally picked up on it in his state, but things have been slowing recently, and as the waves slowly begin to settle, he can’t help but scoot away from something that he instinctively knows is *ancient*. Or, at least, Blessed by it.

“What do you mean, it’s mine?” Tommy asks, confused and redirecting his attention from spiralling into his deeper, ‘meant for three am’ thoughts. “I thought Phil said it’s unhealthy to eat sweets for breakfast.”

At the sound of his name, the man blinks, resurfacing from his mind. He softens, giving Tommy a kind look.

“I did,” he affirms, looking a bit nostalgic for some reason. Maybe it’s because those were words he’d said a *long* time ago, back when things were different and Tommy didn’t feel like everyone knew more about him than he knew about himself. “But this is different. You’re allowed to have sweets on your birthday, Tommy, even if it’s for breakfast.”

*Your birthday.*

Tommy reels back as though he’d been singed. Fuck, his *birthday*. He’d forgotten that birthdays even existed, much less that he had one.

“I—” he begins, throat closing. He looks frantically from Phil to Kristin, then to Techno. Each one of them is watching him quietly, and for once, Tommy realises that it isn’t a

judgemental stare; it's a reassuring one.

The next words out of his mouth were meant to be a genuine question, one that's stony and curious, but it comes out more like a squeak. "My birthday?"

Instantly, everyone seems to soften, eyes drooping at the corners. Tommy forces himself to look away, to stare instead at the details on the cake in front of him. He's never even had a birthday cake before, nothing like this. Every birthday he's ever had back at the Complex was always... strange. It never felt like the ones he'd read about in fairy tales or seen in the old 90's movies that Sapnap used to like watching.

They felt dull, *cold*.

"It's your birthday cake, Tommy," Niki speaks up, voice warm. A hand hovers over his shoulder and instead of flinching like he normally would, Tommy can't help but lean against it, like it's a lifeline.

He can hear the smile in Phil's words when the man pipes up, voice coming from right behind him. "We knew that you didn't get to celebrate it this year, so we thought that we'd try. We're a bit late, but..."

Phil's voice trails off as Tommy's shoulders rise and shake, soft sniffing sounds coming from his mouth. His hair clouds over his face, covering the tears that sting his cheeks.

"It's perfect," Tommy chokes out, reaching up a sleeve to wipe his face before any tears or snot get onto his cake. *His* cake. His beautiful, wonderful cake that is meant for *him*. To celebrate *him*. "It's— it's great, Phil— Techno, Kristin, everyone— uhm. Thank you, really, but..."

"But?" Techno pipes up, his tone matching the others'. A hand lands on the center of his back, grounding; another on his arm.

Everyone's with him, everyone except...

"I can't," Tommy shakes his head, wiping his face with his sleeve and sniffing loudly. "I can't."

"Why not?" Phil questions beside him. He doesn't sound condescending, not like Dream used to. He just sounds *concerned*.

Tommy hums, letting out a little laugh for the first time in days. "I can't, it's not right. Not without Wilbur or Tubbo and Ranboo."

The last two names leave a sour taste in his mouth— they still hadn't shown, hadn't even tried to pop by so that he can properly apologise— but the first makes him feel almost hollow. Tommy is used to it, though, so there isn't too drastic of a difference that he can spot.

As expected, the air thickens when he says Wilbur's name. When Tommy turns his head to meet Phil's eyes, the man is smiling sadly.

"Of course, Tommy," he whispers, tilting his head to the side. He's always looked like a bird when he does that. "We'll postpone, then. Until Wilbur is awake and your friends stop by."

Tommy nods, looking back at the cake on the table. A warmth passes through him, and he smiles.

"Thank you."

---

It only takes one nightmare for Tommy to realise exactly what it is that's been bothering him; that itching feeling underneath his skin, the words resting on the tip of his tongue, all boiled



down to one singular thing: *fear*.

He wakes up, sitting boltright in a cold sweat. His chest heaves, eyes already spilling over with something wet. He doesn't remember crying.

Taking a sharp intake of breath, Tommy presses his hand to his chest and swings his legs over the edge of the mattress.

It's Christmas Eve, something that he only knows because Phil had spent half of the morning rushing about with wrapping paper. Tommy isn't sure how he does it, the energy thing—Kristin had once pointed at the espresso machine as though that explained it, but Tommy *lived* on espresso back in the day, and he'd never had Philza Craft's sheer willpower.

Tommy had wanted to try and sleep the entire night away, to try and forget about the fact that the morning after means *Christmas*. He still hasn't had a clue what the fuck Christmas is like, despite the towering decorated tree that sits tauntingly in the foyer of Phil's house.

He's warmed back up to the Crafts a bit in the past couple of days— not by a lot, there are still so many things that confuse him, especially with the knowledge that they're all members of the *Syndicate*— but it doesn't help with the factor of Christmas.

Like his birthday, Tommy's never really had a proper Christmas. He wanted this year's to be something better; to be different. He'd been excited about it for once, back when he wasn't... this.

(And maybe the memory of The Bard—of *Wilbur*— chasing him down into that alleyway that one day, making him leave behind all the presents that he'd bought everyone does nothing but sour the already bitter taste in his mouth, but he can't really dissuade the thought from crossing his mind).

He'd known not to expect something great for Christmas, though. He doesn't exactly have any presents for anyone, as they were all left stranded in that alley, but he'd *hoped*.

His wishes weren't granted, and he figures that he should've known better than to think they would be for a change.

Carefully, Tommy stumbles his way out of the bedroom, clawing at the walls to keep himself positioned upright. The entire house is quiet, with not even the sounds of a fire crackling providing him any sort of comfort that he is, in fact, not alone; nor caught in the depths of yet another nightmare.

Tommy walks down the house's corridor, moving purely based on muscle memory. He's done this walk before. Multiple times in the five three days that he's been back, he's had nightmares that always lead him right back into the master bedroom where Wilbur remains unconscious.

Not dead, not anymore— just unconscious. He always has to remind himself of that, but he can't help moving his hands to listen to his brother's heartbeat again just to make sure of it.

Tommy pauses in front of the master bedroom and takes a deep breath.

Slowly, he counts in his head: *one, two, three... four.*

Exhaling, Tommy reaches forwards and eases the bedroom door open.

The hallway floods with dim orange light, providing him with the smallest bit of relief. His eyes glide through the bedroom, shoulders relaxing when he sees Wilbur still laid on his back, fast asleep. Just beside the bed, though, Tommy catches sight of Niki, who is sitting upright in the armchair by the nightstand.

Her head leaning to the side, eyes fluttered closed and hair hanging in front of her eyes. She's got a dagger across her legs that is an incredibly stark contrast to the face-down book that it's laying on top of.

Tommy swallows thickly, having a moment where he debates about completely dipping from the room or just standing there like a creepy wax figurine. Or he could pretend to be a ghost.

It's not that he doesn't want to speak with Niki— he's held conversations with her multiple times over the past week or so that this has come to be— but it's... awkward, to say the least. Not that she's Nemesis, but just about everything else. The Banquet, the Hero Complex, all of it.

Of course, even though he is so certain that he thinks at the speed of light, he does not react quickly enough, and one of Niki's eyes open a crack, as though the mere sound of him thinking was loud enough to wake her up.

"Oh," she murmurs, sitting up and rubbing a kink from her neck. "Hey, Tommy."

"Hi Niki," Tommy says awkwardly, keeping his voice quiet. "Sorry, I just wanted to check up on Wil."

Niki smiles at him, warm and inviting. "You're fine, Tommy, don't worry. You didn't technically wake me up or anything, I was only half-asleep."

Tommy isn't sure how true that is, but he decides not to argue.

"Uhm," he begins, looking down at his hands. "Sorry. I was just- uh, if you want, I can take the rest of your shift? If you want to sleep, that is."

Niki frowns, blinking past the sleep so that she can fully take in the way Tommy looks; dishelved.

"Are you alright?" she asks, voice gentle.

"Yeah, yeah, I just..." Tommy shrugs, fumbling with his fingers. "I can't sleep."

Niki hums, "That's alright. I'll be honest, I haven't been able to sleep well either recently. I keep thinking..." she huffs, leaning back against the arm chair, putting a hand to her forehead. "I don't know."

Tommy knows.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs again.

"There's nothing you have to be sorry for," Niki reassures, putting her hand down to smile up at him. "Really, Tommy. You're fine."

They're such simple words for such a heavy situation. Tommy rubs his arm with his hand, warily taking a step forward.

"Can I sit with you?" He asks, unsure of what else to say.

"Course, but I don't want you sitting on the floor," Niki says, standing up to move and lean against the wall.

Tommy holds his hands up in mock defense, eyes wide. "No, that's fine, I like sitting on the floor-"

"I insist," Niki motions towards the chair. "I should stand if I don't want to accidentally fall asleep again anyways."

Tommy hums, walking forward to take a seat with uncertainty.

There are a few moments of very awkward silence where Tommy debates with himself about if he should speak or not, before the words are exiting his mouth without the chance to pull

them back.

"I'm sorry," he says again, but this time it's different. He clears his throat and warily tacks on, "For all of it. The... the party, too. Everything. I'm sorry."

Niki tenses a little, then sighs. "Tommy, that wasn't your fault."

"It *was*, though," he shakes his head, tapping his foot against the floor anxiously. If she really wanted to, Niki could probably kill him right here, right now. There's nothing stopping her from doing so- no Phil nor Techno hovering around to make sure that all the different types of people crowded into one house get along. Even so, Tommy continues. "I was a hero, Niki. I- I hurt people, and- not to mention that I willingly participated in the Banquet, and that Quackity used to be one of my close friends. I came to the party, I put on a mask, I-

"Did you know that innocent people would die?"

Tommy flinches at the suddenness of her question, wrapping his arms around himself. His voice is quiet, but he answers honestly. "I knew that heroes would."

"That's not what I'm asking, Tommy," Niki interrupts. Tommy can feel her put a hand on the back of the chair he's sat on. "I'm asking if you knew that *innocent* people would die or be put in danger. Did you?"

"Well, no," Tommy begins slowly, before shaking his head again. "But that doesn't change anything. I still knew some people were going to die, and I went anyway. I don't- I shouldn't have. People don't deserve to die, no matter how awful."

He tries his best to ignore how much he wishes to have taken that sword out of Wilbur and put it through Dream instead. He wouldn't— the mere thought makes him feel sicker than before— but a part of him deep down wants the man *gone*.

Niki clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Tommy, you didn't host the Banquet. You weren't the puppeteer pulling the strings, and you *certainly* weren't the person that planted those bombs in the first place. Yes, you attended it, and you shouldn't have- but tell me, and be honest. Did you really go to that event expecting there to be people like Tubbo or Ranboo showing up? Or even the other heroes and villains that you don't count as exactly 'entirely evil?'"

Tommy opens his mouth, wanting to say something like *No, but that doesn't excuse my actions*, but he shuts it. Instead, he simply shrugs, which makes Niki sigh softly.

Gently, she places her hand on his shoulder. It doesn't seem like a rude thing, nor like a way for her to somehow intimidate him— in fact, it feels rather grounding above all else.

"I've been visiting Las Nevadas recently," she begins, keeping her tone light. "I've been speaking with Jes-" she exhales sharply, grinding her teeth for a second, as if the name agonises her to say out loud. "With *Quackity*. He's been telling me about the Banquet- after, well, apologising, which is something that I've never expected to hear from the guy, but nonetheless..."

She pats his shoulder lightly. Tommy would flinch if he wasn't so used to the amount of affection he's been getting recently. It wasn't as much as he did before Morpheus, but little things here and there; a ruffle of hair from Techno, a slap on the back from Jack (who proceeded to make it a lot softer after Tommy flinched so hard he knocked a cup off of the table when he did it the first time), and other means of casual touch that implied only one thing— family.

Tommy would hate it. He *should* hate it, but he doesn't.

"Quackity explained the situation," she murmurs, clearing her throat. "He told me about how you weren't sure and only went through with it because Morph— because *he* was there."

Tommy lets out a soft breath, the smallest bit of relief covering him over the fact that she didn't say his name.

Nobody has been saying it recently except for the people on the news channel, but he tries to tune them out as much as he can. (He nearly threw Techno's thick book of Greek myths at the screen last time he'd actually listened in—the last thing he wanted to hear was multiple people blaming his hypothetical family of the heroes' disappearances).

"That still doesn't change anything, Niki," Tommy replies, tapping his fingers against his thigh. "I still went to it. I still hoped to see *someone* die, and- and even if he's- even if he's awful, and I *still* want to kill him—"

"I know," Niki promises, sounding strained. Not at him, it seems like, but almost at herself. "I know. You don't want that on your conscience. I don't either, never have and yet a part of me wants so badly to see his head on some type of stake." She sighs, before continuing. "It's something that we can all discuss... later. For now, Quackity and Sam have him locked up underneath Las Nevadas with twenty-four hour supervision. He's not going anywhere until we figure out what to do with him, okay?"

Tommy nods, even though his throat is beginning to close up again. He knows Dream. He knows how he works. He'd never go willingly like this. There's a plan; there *has* to be. (And yet, they've heard nothing from the man. Well, nothing according to Phil and the rest of the people that have gone to visit him in his makeshift solitary confinement, but nonetheless...)

"We'll figure it out," Niki says again, hoping to drive the point home. She reaches forwards, holding her hand out for his. He can hear the smile in her words when he takes it. "All of us will. And..." she trails off, her voice cracking. "And Wilbur will too, when he wakes up."

Tommy hasn't much of a choice than to nod again, shifting uncomfortably in the chair. *When he wakes up.*

There's a pause, and Niki lets go, reaching up to pat his arm. "Actually, Tommy, if that offer of taking my spot for the night still stands, I just might take you up on it. I'm feeling pretty exhausted. I'd hate to keel over standing up as well- we'd have a whole calvary on our hands."

Tommy snorts. She's right— if she did fall over in the middle of the night, it wouldn't be long before Phil and Techno ran into the room, eyes fiery and weapons prepared. And, honestly... Tommy isn't entirely sure if he's ready to see that yet.

So he simply nods, scooting his chair closer to the bed so that she has access to move from behind it. "Yeah, it still stands. Go get some sleep, Niki."

She reaches out, gently ruffling his hair as though they're back in the kitchens at Nook's again. Tommy can almost feel the fly-away flour falling off of her hands and into his hair. Jack had always made fun of him for having 'makeshift dandruff'.

*Asshole*, he thinks, despite the warm feeling that brushes against his shoulders. (He misses it, as much as he wishes he could deny that).

"Try not to stay up too late," Niki reminds him kindly, brushing past the chair for the door. She pauses before leaving, turning on her heel. "And Tommy?"

Tommy looks up, and she smiles at him. It's genuine—he can see it in the dimple at the corner of her mouth.

"Happy belated birthday... and Merry Christmas, I suppose," she says gently, tapping her nails against the doorframe. "You're a good kid, you know. Never forget that, okay?"

With that, she gives him another bright look, and exits the room.

Tommy lowers his head, barely suppressing a smile himself.

---

A hand cards through his hair.

It's a nice feeling, familiar in the way they scratch a little just behind Tommy's ear.



Murmuring a little bit in his sleep, Tommy shifts closer to the person's hand, face pressing into the mattress.

There's a tired but warm laugh above him that makes his nose wrinkle in confusion and... something else.

Slowly, he opens one eye, blinking blearily through the darkness. One of the lamps in the bedroom have been switched off, but the other one- on the opposite side of the bed- has been left turned on, displaying a gentle, orangey-hue against the walls of the bedroom.

"Wh't?" Tommy grumbles to himself, leaning into the hand against his face. He hasn't entirely recognised where he is yet— still waking up— or who it is that's currently running their fingers through his hair.

Maybe he's just dreaming again. That's always possible— he does have them quite frequently, although they're typically more nightmarish than this.

This... it's nice. If this is a dream, he hopes to not wake up anytime soon.

"Shh," the person nearby whispers in a raspy tone, sounding just as exhausted as Tommy feels. "It's alright, Toms. Go back to sleep."

Tommy frowns, all the more confused. He shifts slightly, turning his head more so that he can properly see who's speaking to him.

His eyes meet a pair of warm brown and all at once, reality seems to smack itself into his brain, and Tommy sits upright like he's been jolted awake with a hot iron rod.

"Wil?" He whispers, only feeling slightly sad for the hand to have left his hair from how quickly he'd sat upwards.

"Mhm?" Wilbur hums, a small reply that somehow seems to have Tommy practically in tears.

Tommy chokes, scooting closer to the bedside and reaching out to take Wilbur's hand. He puts two fingers over his wrist, waiting— and hears it. The *thump-thump, thump-thump*; a normal pace, albeit one wracked with fatigue.

He's almost tempted to go through the grounding technique that Techno had taught him more about as of recently, but as he listens more to Wilbur's steady heartbeat and the sounds of creaking wood (really, this house is too old), he feels that he's awake.

"You're alive," Tommy whispers, putting his head back down onto the mattress to hide his teary face. He can hear Wilbur laughing above him quietly, and he can't help his own giggles that begin to bubble up in his chest with excitement. "You're— oh my God, Wil you're here—you're *alive*!"

A hand cards through his hair again, pressing against the side of his head.

Tommy's laughter dies and he lets out another strangled sob into the mattress, refusing to look back up at Wilbur in case this *is* just another dream— in case he's wrong, and if he looks at Wilbur's face again, all he's going to see is Dream's smile looking back at him.

"Of course I'm alive," Wilbur whispers, slowly moving his hand to lift Tommy's head up to meet his tired— but happy and *alive*— eyes.

In the dimness of the light, Tommy can see it; Wilbur's face, the brown curls in front of his eyes, and the newly grown white fringe at the front of his hair that now matches Tommy's own. He's noticed it ever since he was revived, but it's so apparent now with him being awake that Tommy can't help the choked sound that leaves his throat at the sight of it. Dream couldn't fake something like this.

Tilting his head at the look on Tommy's face, Wilbur smiles, and his eyes crinkle in the corners. He thumbs away a stray tear on Tommy's cheek, eyes full of remorse and knowing.

“I did promise you, didn’t I?”

## Chapter End Notes

i’ll be completely honest with u... i also wrote this chapter during my period of illness (bovid) so it’s a very much fever dream however!! i thought it would be nice to have a sort of... idk? chapter where things begin to calm down again? where it reverts to the crack fic it was beforehand, with just the hints of angst aha (:

BUT HEYYYYY GUYS!!! if you didn’t read my beginning note, YOOO happy one year anniversary to this fic!!!! that shit is SO fucking wild dawg. i never expected to have been still writing this a year later, but here we are!!! thank you to everyone that’s stuck with me for this long & is still enjoying the silly little story i’m writing!!! i love & appreciate each and every one of you. it means a lot to me <3 :)

anyway, in saying that, i’m sorry that this chapter is incredibly short!! hopefully it’ll tide you all over while i go back to my hiatus though. bc ,, i kind of went off of my hiatus so that i wouldn’t leave this fic on such a huge cliffhanger if that makes sense? in general i wasn’t comfortable with where i’d left off on this fic when i did go on hiatus, so i hoped that by adding the few chapters that i had that it would be easier for me to chill out on my hiatus so!! we will see how that goes :D in the mean time, i hope you’re all doing well, and stay safe everyone <3 b!wilbur is back, but this is yet another calm before the storm. <3333

bye bye kings!!!! :D thank you once again for keeping up w this story  
hofldbkskhakjaksmd that is so fucking cool. i still can’t comprehend it omg /pos

## End Notes

ur little notes in the bookmarks & ur comments make my day so thank u so much for them :((  
/gen /pos <3 and holy shit !! for NINE K kudos as well, i'm gonna lose my mind. ur all so  
sweet. stay safe, beloveds /p <3

(btw, go check out the fics that inspired me to write this !! /nf they're so v good omg)

---

everything in this fic is purely PLATONIC. please do not interact if you take anything as  
slash romantic because none of it is <3 tysm !! do not be weirdchamp lmao

---

FANART?? HOLY SHIT WE HAVE FANft ???! i'm losing my shit /pos omg.

[annie \[@tmmychat\]'s absolutely fantastic fanart of butterflies!tommy](#)

[strawbbe \[@strawbbe\]'s amazing superhero fanart w/ butterflies!tommy :D](#)

[yam \[@yammanatee\]'s beautiful fanart of ch34 crimeboys eheheheh :D](#)

## Works inspired by this one

[We The Reckless](#) by [gardencress](#)

[The amazing life of Tommyinnit—Your not-so friendly neighborhood Spider-Man  
\(DISCONTINUED\)](#) by Anonymous

[We're Like Brothers, You and I](#) by [IcyFox17](#)

[I'm Here For A Good Time, Not A Long Time](#) by [JustVibingMan](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!